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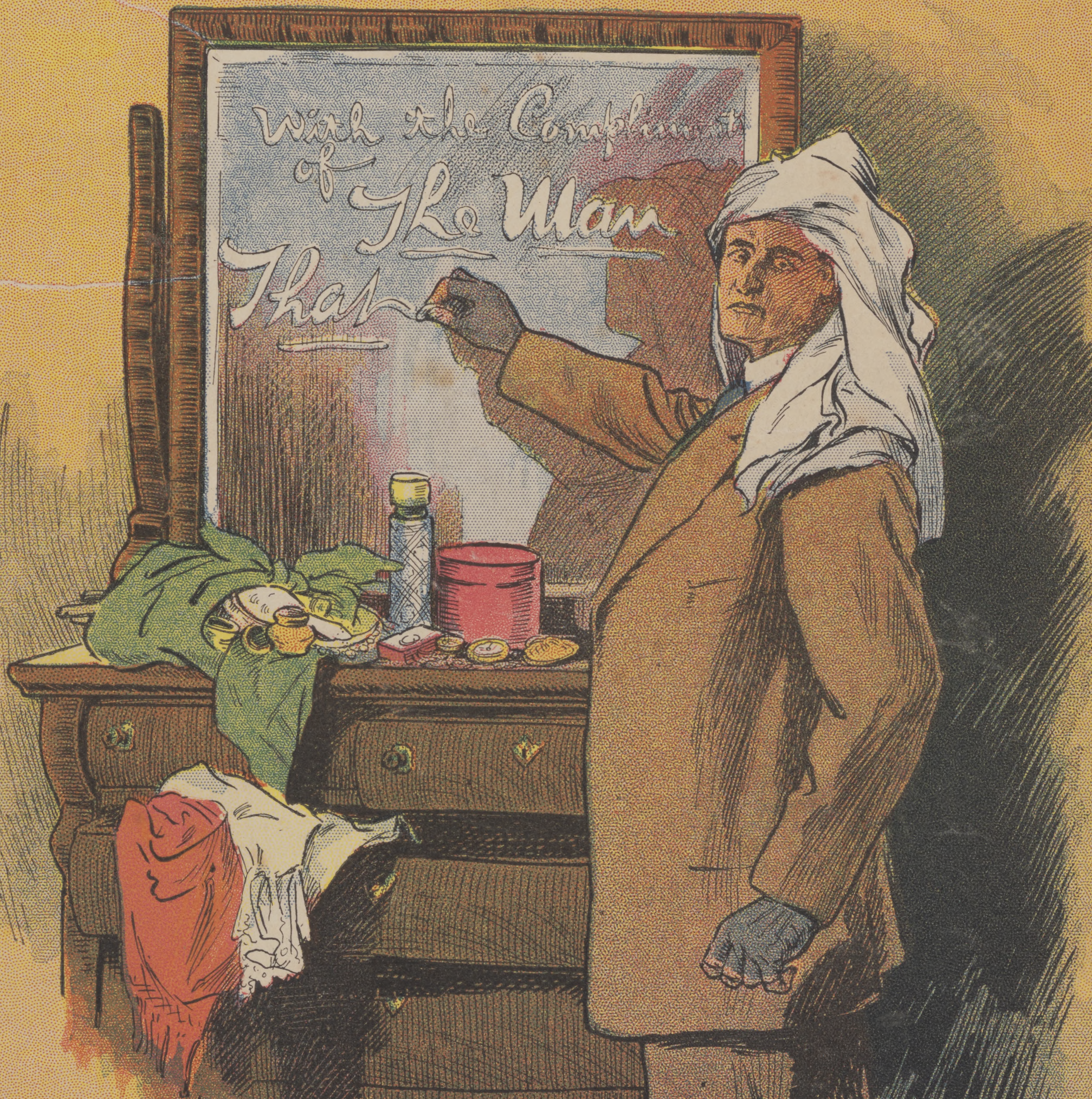
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

THE MAN THAT CAME BACK


With the Compliments of The Man That

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REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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THE MAN THAT CAME BACK;

OR,

Nick Carter's Finish Fight.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE PRISONER.

We will look upon a scene which puzzled the entire police force of the city of Blank for many a day.

We look upon it by permission, because, at the time of this escape from prison of the notorious burglar, Mawker, variously known as The Mocker and as former Inspector of Police Roland W. Creighton, as well as at the time of his former escape, Nick Carter had a very clear idea in his mind as to how both escapes had been accomplished.

And so, to avoid the necessity of an explanation later, we will watch this expert and versatile criminal while he calmly walks away from the confining walls of the prison where his former chief and Nick Carter placed him for safe-keeping.

The very fact that he had been for a long time connected with the police force of the city where he was imprisoned, and, in fact, acting head of the detective bureau of that same body of men, added to the excitement that had been stirred up by the discovery that one of the high officials of the police was all the time preying upon the community as a daring burglar, had rendered it imperative that he should be placed in one of the strongest and most secure of the cells at headquarters.

Not but what they were all strong and secure—at least, they were supposed to be—but merely that this particular one was so situated that it was thought to be a trifle stronger and more secure than the others.

In fact, there is no doubt at all but that any of them might have held in perfect security any other prisoner than this one man, former Inspector Creighton, "The Mocker."

The chief of police had once said that he regarded Creighton as the most resourceful man he had ever known; Creighton proved it in the method of his escape; he proved, moreover, when it came to be known how he did escape, how far-seeing he was, and how carefully he had arranged for any and every emergency that the future might bring to him.

A brief recapitulation of his previous history is not out of place right here, since it will consume but little time and space. The city of Blank, where he was most active, is called Blank herein because, since the story has to do with a prominent police official who "went wrong," it is deemed wiser not to cast unnecessary reflections upon the fair name of that community.

In the beginning it was Inspector Creighton who summoned Nick Carter to that city to run down the great criminal—himself, in other words.

Mawker, the burglar, had used original methods from the start; he did not work as others of his kind worked; he had no pals, no helpers, no confederates. He went everywhere, not only masked, but masked with a hood that completely covered him. He wore gloves on his hands, so that they could not be seen, and so that they would leave no finger marks to trace him by if he should inadvertently touch glass or rest the tips of his digits upon a dust-covered table top. He never spoke above a whisper. He had methods of entering and leaving a house he burglarized which defied every sort of guard against him from burglar alarms to watchdogs.

Whenever he was opposed he did not hesitate to use violence. He had no objection to adding murder to a burglary if it became, from his point of view, necessary—as was proved by two crimes of that sort which rested against him.

The latter one of these had seemed to be almost wanton, for it had resulted in the deliberate shooting to death of a millionaire banker named Philip Morton—and the shooting had been done because Morton had refused to reveal the secret of some plans and maps of a lost gold mine that was known as the Congdon Mine.

Congdon, from whom the mine received its name, had been a maternal uncle of Creighton, so it developed. Creighton believed that he had certain inherited rights to the mine, and had sought to secure them, and in that seeking had blown open a secret vault that Morton had constructed under his private residence—and, oddly enough, it was the fact that he even knew that such a vault existed beneath the house of the banker that had proved his first undoing.

So Creighton had been summoned to the office of his chief from an opera he was attending, had been identified by one Demetrius Rackapolo, a Turkish secret agent whom Nick Carter had brought all the way from Constantinople for the purposes of identification—and had made his escape from the cell in which he was confined that same night.

But his liberty had endured less than twenty-four hours, for the man had gone at once to the summer home of Miss Emily Morton, daughter of the banker he had murdered, and had boldly abducted her, in the effort to get from her that greatly desired secret of the Congdon Mine.

But the man had overstepped himself.

With the very efficient aid of a street boy who rejoiced in the name of Torchy, and who had stated that his full name was Billyum Fizzwaters, Nick Carter had traced the man to his hiding place—to the place to which he had taken his young woman captive—and had arrested him late in the afternoon of the same day of his escape, and returned him to headquarters.

It was approximately six o'clock in the afternoon when Creighton was taken to the cell at headquarters.

The chief of police, who personally followed him there, and who saw to the securing of the bars against his former coworker, was of the opinion that the former escape had been made with a key which the ex-inspector had secreted somewhere about his person, and which had not been discovered in the search that was made.

So, this time, he had had the inspector stripped naked, and an entire new outfit of clothing supplied to him, and at the conclusion of that arrangement the chief had said:

"There, Creighton, if your clothing contained a key which unlocks the doors of these headquarters cells, you won't find it now."

After that Creighton was left in the solitude of his cell—a cell into which he had caused to be thrust many a felon before that time.

The sardonic smile never left the face of the former inspector during the taking of all these precautions.

He looked upon them without comment; he did not even take the trouble to taunt the chief, or Nick Carter, or Chick, or Patsy, or the Turk with the Greek name of Demetrius, all of whom were present and observant.

He preserved his customary demeanor of silence.

Upstairs in the office, after they had returned from putting Creighton into the cell, Nick Carter had remarked:

"I have been watching Creighton rather closely since I brought him back here to you, chief, and I make the prediction, now, that unless you take a lot of extra and unusual precautions, you won't find him in his cell in the morning."

"How is he going to get out of it?" retorted the chief.

The detective merely shrugged his shoulders, nodded to his companions, and they all left the building.

After all, it was not up to Nick Carter to hold a prisoner after he was once taken and delivered to the proper authorities. The chief was now responsible for the safe-keeping of Creighton, alias Mawker, alias "The Mocker."

But after Nick Carter had gone from the building the last words of the detective recurred to the chief, and he summoned his secretary to him and gave a few particular orders.

Those orders included the placing of a special guard in the corridor where the cell occupied by Creighton was located.

It was an unlucky hour for that policeman when he was placed there on guard, as the sequel proved. But we need not get ahead of our story.

It becomes our privilege now to look upon that scene to which reference was made in the opening sentence of this short history.

Remember, please, that almost every man on the force was known personally to the ex-inspector; certainly every man of them stationed at headquarters was known to him, and knew him, also.

Before being taken to his cell, Creighton asked that he be supplied with the evening papers, and from six o'clock till nine, with the exception of the short time it required to dispose of the dinner that was sent to him, he busied himself with reading them.

The officer on watch in the corridor, with particular instructions to keep that cell in sight all the time, was named Barney Mackey, and Barney had placed a chair at an angle of the corridor, thirty feet away from the cell, because he had been ordered not to converse with the prisoner.

It would have been better had he been directed to place his chair directly in front of the cell door, and to talk all he wished to.

There was an iron cot in the cell, fastened to the floor so it could not be moved—but that it could be utilized in some way, nevertheless, was now speedily proven.

At half-past nine Creighton, dressed as he was, stretched himself upon the cot.

Barney, who had overheard him moving about the cell, came to the door of it and looked inside; but he saw nothing save the act of Creighton in lying down upon the cot, and he returned to his chair at the turn of the corridor, thirty feet away.

Then it was that Creighton began to get busy.

He reached down with his right hand to a certain part of the frame of the cot upon which he was lying; he unscrewed the cap from one end of the gas-pipe frame—a cap that was supposed to have been riveted on, after it was screwed on, but from which Creighton, long ago, anticipating this moment, had removed the rivets, and so rendered the screw cap practicable. And, be it said, he had done precisely the same thing to every cot in every cell at police headquarters.

Having unscrewed the cap, a hollow receptacle inside the pipe was, of course, open to him.

Without rising, without moving from the position he occupied on the cot, he withdrew from that hollow tube in the piping a steel rod, which seemed to fit in it exactly, but which proved to be pointed at the opposite end, when it was all drawn out.

This rod, in turn, was fitted with a screw cap at the blunt end, which Creighton lost no time in removing, and from the shallow receptable thus disclosed he recovered a key—one of many that he had made in the past, and concealed in the different cells in just that manner.

He arose silently from the cot and listened at the door of the cell. He could hear the guard rustling his paper as he read it.

Creighton reached cautiously for the lock and silently inserted the key. He turned it slowly and carefully. The bolt was turned back without a sound. The door of the cell was unlocked. He withdrew the key from the lock and returned it to the shallow hollow at the blunt end of the steel bar, which, from the blunt end to the sharp-pointed end, was ten inches long. Then, holding the pointed instrument in his hand as one would hold a dagger, he called aloud:

"Barney! Come here a moment."

CHAPTER II.

A DEMON LET LOOSE.

Cell doors open into the corridors, never into the cells; otherwise Creighton might have done differently than he did—for in that case he could have pulled the door open toward him with little danger of Barney's discovering that it had been opened, until he came too close to make such a discovery available.

As it was, with escape the only objective at which Creighton aimed, no matter what the consequence might be, Barney, hearing the call, calmly folded the paper he had been reading, laid it aside, arose, and went leisurely to his doom.

For, as Creighton would doubtless have argued, there was no other way open to him, in carrying out his plan of escape.

If Barney found the opportunity, he would undoubtedly give the alarm, and one shout from him would have summoned others to the scene before Creighton could have gotten away.

So, Barney went to the cell door. He looked inside. He could not see that the door had been unlocked.

"What do you want, inspector?" he asked. Long habit had compelled him to address the prisoner by the title he had disgraced so long a time.

"Barney," said Creighton, tentatively temporizing, "I have a considerable amount of cash stored away where it is safe, and where I can easily get at it. Will you take twenty thousand dollars in cold dough, and let me out of here?"

Barney shook his head, grinning.

"Couldn't do it, inspector, not for a hundred thousand," he replied. "You see, it wouldn't do me any good—for I'd be where you are now. I couldn't get away with it, even if I was willing—which I ain't."

Creighton was back in the middle of the floor of the cell, but now he took a step forward; at the same time Barney, conforming to a recognized habit of officers on guard over prisoners in cells, as he was, moved up close to the bars which formed the cell door, grasped one of them in each hand, put his face close to one of the spaces between the bars, and stood there, half leaning forward and half supporting himself in that manner.

Creighton took a second step, still nearer to him.

"Think it over, Barney," he said.

"No use, Mr. Creighton." Barney remembered this time, and left out the title.

"Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of money, Barney." Creighton was becoming persuasive.

"It might just as well be twenty cents," was the reply. Creighton moved a trifle nearer to the bars.

"I'll make it fifty thousand, Barney," he said. "You know I got two hundred thousand from that Morton haul."

"Uh-huh! If you made it a million, it wouldn't make a mite of difference, Creighton."

The ex-inspector was quite close to Barney by then, but he had moved forward so slowly that Barney had not realized it at all.

"Wouldn't it make any difference, Barney, if I should offer you the whole two hundred thousand?"

"Not a mite," was the firm reply.

"Then—perhaps—this—last offer of mine—will!"

Creighton's right hand, until then half concealed behind him, shot forward with the suddenness of the tongue of a toad, which is called the quickest thing known to animal life.

The steel rod, with its needlelike point, darted between the bars of the door.

It pierced the clothing and the flesh and the heart of Barney Mackey, just as a needle, to which it has been compared, might have done the same.

The attack was so sudden, had been so dexterously planned, was so scientifically aimed, and was dealt so unerringly, that the policeman did not even cry out.

He gasped. His joints at the hips, knees, ankles, gave way. He wilted where he stood. He collapsed upon the cemented floor of the corridor. He dropped as a wet rag might have dropped. There was a spasmodic move or two after he had fallen. Then he was still, and silent, and dead.

That which had been Barney Mackey, on guard over a prisoner, was now only a thing—a dead thing; and Mawker, the burglar, formerly Inspector Creighton, in charge of the detective bureau of the city of Blank, was again a murderer.

The fact seemed to have made little impression upon him, nevertheless.

When Barney fell he retained his hold upon the steel weapon, and so withdrew it from the wound; then he turned and wiped it carefully upon the blanket of the cot; then he unscrewed the cap a second time and shook out a second key, and a third one, from the hollow receptacle at the blunt end of it.

The third one he retained; the second one he returned to the hiding place inside the steel rod. He screwed the cap back into place. He returned the steel rod to its former place of concealment in the gas-pipe frame of the cot, and screwed that cap tightly into place again.

Everything was now as it had been, save that he still possessed the first key to the door of the cell that he had taken from its hiding place; but there was still another key like it inside the cot frame, if he should ever again become a resident of that same cell.

He pushed open the door of the cell, pushing Barney's body aside as he did so.

He lifted the body, put it on the cot inside the cell, and covered it with the blanket.

Then he stepped outside upon the corridor, closed and locked the cell door, and, with Barney's cap on his head and Barney's blouse upon his shoulders, to avoid observation by the occupants of other cells, he passed silently but swiftly along the corridor toward the door that would open the way to the other parts of the building, and thence to freedom.

He had Barney's stick and Barney's revolver with him now, in case he should be forced to use them; but he did not anticipate any such necessity, for he was thoroughly familiar with the routine inside that building, having directed it so long.

He knew just how to avoid every chance of discovery, now that the way to the outside was practically open to him—and that third key that he had retained was the key to the only door that was now locked against him.

Creighton passed it in safety, without discovery; he locked it after him.

He stood in the corridor of the main building, free.

Free? Well, not quite, as yet—for there were several officers scattered through the corridors of the building, and two on guard at the entrance he would have to pass to get to the street, who must not suspect who he was until he had gone.

Well, he knew how to accomplish that little feat, too. He had given orders and directions regarding those very things, in his official capacity, so long a time that it was all like a lesson in A B C to him.

So, instead of proceeding at once to the main entrance, and attempting to pass outside, as another might have done, he turned into a smaller and narrower hallway, which led to a private door of communication with the office of the chief; and he knew perfectly well that the chief would not be in his office at that hour. He might come in again, later in the night, but he would not be there just then.

He knew, too, that his own office—the one he had occupied officially until twenty-four hours prior to that very moment—would still be about as he had left it. His successor had not been appointed as yet; another officer was acting in his place until such an appointment was made, but that other officer had an office of his own, and would not have preëmpted Creighton's.

Creighton's old office was across the corridor from the private office of the chief, but Creighton knew that, by watching his opportunity, he could easily slip across that space without being observed.

He did it, too; and, once in his old office, he hurried. He locked the door; then he took down from a closet an old uniform of a regular policeman who pounds a beat, which he had sometimes had occasion to use as acting head of the detective bureau.

Creighton put it on—cap, belt, stick, and shield, and all that went with it.

Then he took down from a shelf in the closet a tin box, such as some men use for the temporary storage of papers or letters.

This one, however, when he opened it, was stored with wigs and beards and pigments, and with other things for the manufacture of quick disguises.

Ten minutes later he resembled one of the Italian policemen from the "Little Italy" district who were sometimes summoned to headquarters for special duty.

Arrayed so, he passed out upon the corridor again. He walked calmly down it, and down the stairs to the main floor of the building. He passed along that corridor to the main entrance, saluted the two guards there as he passed them, uttered no word—and passed out upon the street.

He even halted at the bottom step of the main entrance and hesitated, as if he had the idea of returning; but that was a part of the deception he was practicing. One of the officers in the doorway observed him, and called out:

"Forget something, Tony?"

He shook his head without replying, and went on his way. Plainly, the men at the door supposed him to be Tony, the Italian copper from Little Italy.

Creighton disappeared into the night, and the hands of the clock in the tower of the headquarters building indicated 10.15 o'clock.

He had consumed forty-five minutes only in making his escape, counting from the moment when he had stretched himself upon the cot in the cell.

He walked the streets boldly, taking no precautions to avoid any man, whether in uniform or not; but he spoke to none, merely saluting whenever that was required of him, and passing on in silence.

Creighton was a bachelor; nevertheless, he had occupied a small detached house located in the suburbs of the city, where he kept a Chinese servant.

He did not know whether his house had been searched or not during the twenty-four busy hours that had elapsed since his first arrest and the five hours that had passed since his second arrest; but he doubted it. He knew how things moved in that department.

Anyhow, there were things that he wanted to get at that house, and other things that he did not wish anybody else to get, if it could be avoided; so he went there.

A risk? No, none at all, as he regarded it.

His escape was not suspected; it would not—could not, he argued—be discovered short of nearly two hours more; so he made a bee line for his own home in the suburbs, walking all the way. The lighted interior of cars did not attract him; cabs were not to be considered; and in the small yard at the rear of his house was a little garage which contained a swift and powerful motor car of his own.

Creighton had already determined what he would do as soon as he had completed the few small affairs that took him to his own former home—and they would not detain him long. One of the things that he intended to do was to visit again the country house of Emily Morton, two miles out of the city. What he intended to do after he got there does not yet appear.

Another thing upon that short program, to be accomplished before morning, was an act of reprisal and recrimination against the boy Torchy, who had betrayed him, as he regarded it—and even small boys could not hope for immunity from his fierce hate, once it was engendered.

There were other things, too.

CHAPTER III.

A TERRIBLE DEED.

Creighton walked the three miles to his home in thirty minutes, or less.

He remained inside the house another thirty minutes. Then he came out with the Chinaman, and they carried between them a small leather trunk, which they took to the garage and deposited safely within the motor car.

They made a second trip of the same sort, and brought out another leather trunk. Both were strapped to the rumble of the car.

Then Creighton spoke to the Chinaman in his own language, for Chinese was one of the things that he had acquired during his years of adventurous wanderings which had terminated in Constantinople, where he had worked side by side with the man Demetrius. One of the Chinaman's chief assets in serving Creighton was the fact that he understood no word of English.

The Chinaman, in response to the order he received, climbed into one of the bucket seats of the car and waited, while his master returned again to the house.

He was absent some minutes that time, and returned hastily, climbed into the driver's seat, threw in the clutch, advanced the spark, and sped out of the yard to the highway.

As Creighton sped away with the car, certain windows of the house he had just left began to glow, as with sudden illumination.

The glow increased, and presently, when the car was out of sight, having turned a corner toward the country, fierce flames cracked the glass at the windows, licked at the sills, leaped outward and upward, and enveloped the whole house in fire; and within half an hour it was a mass of smoldering embers and twisted débris, fallen into a molten or half-consumed chaos, to the cellar.

There had been no one to turn in an alarm in time; the fire department arrived on the scene too late to do any good.

Creighton stopped his car for a moment upon a rise of ground, just as a myriad of sparks shot into the air from the burning house. He looked backward and chuckled:

"So passes Roland Creighton," he murmured. Then he applied the power again, and the car leaped forward a second time; and its way led out of the city toward the home of Emily Morton, saved only a few short hours ago from Creighton's power, by Nick Carter, and now so soon again threatened.

* * * * * * *

Nick Carter started wide awake and leaped from the bed in his room at the hotel. The telephone was ringing.

"Hello!" he said, over the wire.

"This is the chief of police at the phone," came the reply. "I am at my own home. I have just been notified that Creighton has escaped again."

"I am not surprised," said Nick. "I more than half expected it—perhaps not quite so soon. But why do you call me up to tell me about it, chief? I am out of it. You can catch him yourself this time. Perhaps, when you do so, you will take a little more pains to hold him."

"Wait," replied the chief. "Don't be hasty in your conclusions."

"Well?"

"Creighton, in making his escape, murdered the officer who was on guard—Barney Mackey. Stabbed him through the heart."

"I'm sorry for Barney, and for his people. It is largely your own fault, chief. You know that you should have placed two, or even three, men on guard over Creighton."

"The door of the cell was locked; Barney's body was inside on the cot."

"Well? What of all that? Creighton, having foreseen such an emergency, had duplicate keys concealed in every cell at headquarters. I haven't a doubt that you will find the others if you search for them."

"That isn't all, either, Carter."

"No? What more?"

"After the escape he went to his own home and set it afire. It is burned to the ground."

"He was, as usual, thoughtful and painstaking. There were, doubtless, things there that he wanted, and things that he did not want you to have. Ergo, the fire. Anything more?"

"Yes—and when I tell you the last bit of information, I think you will change your mind about what you said just now—about your being 'out of it,' and that I can catch him myself this time."

"Well, what is it?"

"There is another fire, which Creighton probably set, after he had fired his own house."

"Another fire? Where?"

"Miss Emily Morton's country home."

"What?"

"Fact, Carter. It is still burning, although it is a total loss. Three engines were sent out to it, but there was no hope of saving it from the first. And, Carter, it is feared——"

"Good Heaven! You don't mean that there was loss of life?"

"Yes. Emily and her maid are both missing. It is thought that they have perished."

"No, no! I cannot believe that. If it is the work of Creighton, as it doubtless is, he has carried her away, as he did before."

"I doubt it, Carter. I thought so, too, at first; but I doubt it."

"Why?"

"She would be in his way. She would be a hindrance. Anyhow, don't you think you had better go out there?"

"Yes. I will go at once."

"I will call for you with my car in fifteen minutes."

"Very well; I'll be ready."

Nick Carter never dressed himself more speedily than he did then.

As soon as his clothing was adjusted he hastened into the corridor of the hotel, and to the room occupied by Chick, which was near at hand. To him he told the news he had just received.

"I don't know, Chick," he said, in conclusion, "whether Creighton has deliberately done the horrible and almost inconceivable thing of destroying Emily in her own home—of burning her to death in her own bed—or if he has carried her off again; but I incline to the latter theory."

"So do I."

"Still, he is a venomous scoundrel. This last experience with her may have made him just want to destroy her."

"I don't think so," said Chick, shaking his head slowly. "I have got just one reason, and a very good one, I think, for not thinking so."

"You mean that the villain is in love with her?"

"Yes, as much as he is capable of being in love with any woman."

"Even that would not stay his hand, if he wished her out of the way. There are women and women in the world, so far as he is concerned."

"I know; but I have always thought that he regarded her differently. I don't think it was the fortune she possesses, nor the secret of the Congdon Mine that he holds, that was her attraction for him. I think it was herself."

"Possibly.

"Yesterday afternoon, when we cornered him in that upper room at old Badger's 'fence,' when he had her in his power for a few hours only, I watched him—watched him while you were otherwise busy."

"Well?"

"He preserved his customary silence, as you know; but I discovered several glances of his toward her that made me think—well, what I have just said. If there is a soft spot in the entire make-up of that man, it is for her. I don't think he would harm her, under any circumstances."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"The man's an enigma," he said; "an anomaly; a contradiction; and, with it all, a fiend. There is no telling what he might do."

"No; I'll admit that."

"Let us hope, then, that she—oh, well, we've got to hope—that's all."

"Precisely."

"Now, Chick, the chief is coming here after me with his car. He should be here within a couple of minutes now. I am going out there with him."

"Of course. So will I, eh?"

"No. I want you to rouse out Patsy and Demetrius, then go to Landis' garage and procure two of his best cars—speedy ones."

"All right."

"We may want to move in two directions at once, after we have looked about us out there, you know."

"Yes."

"That's all. Follow along as quickly as you can."

"I'll be right after you. What time is it now?"

"Twenty minutes to three."

The chief of police drove to the hotel entrance just as the detective stepped out upon the pavement. Nick leaped into the car beside the chief before it had come to a full stop, and they sped onward again.

"Any more news?" the detective asked.

"Nothing in particular. It was the fire at Creighton's house that gave us the first warning that he had escaped. Then, just as one of the men rushed down to the cells to find—what he did find there, Tony Sabino, one of the Italian squad, put in an appearance at the building."

"What of that?"

"Nothing—only the two doormen remembered that Tony had apparently been there only a little while before, and when he said that he had not it was easy to guess that Creighton had gone to his own old office after he escaped from the cell, had made himself up as Tony, and walked out of the building in that manner."

"I see; but that isn't important."

"No."

"What else do you know about the fire—out at Morton's?"

"Only that the building seemed to burst into flame from every part of it, and from every window, at the same time. There wasn't any chance for anybody to escape—unless they got out, or were taken out, before the fire started; and not a soul of all that household, save two of the servants, has been seen since. That is what I was told over the telephone."

"Well, that would leave only three persons unaccounted for."

"Yes; or, rather, two, eh—not three, Carter?"

"Emily, her maid Celeste, and Torchy."

"Torchy? Oh, that boy who helped you yesterday? Was he there, too?"

"Yes. Emily took him home with her. It was her intention to give him a home, and an education, for what he did for her—and for me, in the search for her."

"He is the kid that Creighton said something about not forgetting last night, eh?"

"Yes."

"Then take it from me, Carter—Creighton has burned up the whole outfit."

CHAPTER IV.

A QUESTION OF A TRAIL.

The ruins of the once magnificent buildings, as soon as they were sufficiently cool, were thoroughly searched, but not a trace of the remains of a human body could be found; and so it was determined that no deaths had resulted from the fire, and, to whatever depths of monstrosity Creighton had descended in the last move in his career, he at least had not resorted to the inhuman act of burning his enemies to death.

Bear in mind that it was between three and four o'clock in the morning when Nick Carter rode out to Poplar Hall with the chief. The buildings were in ruins then, and all effort to save anything at all had been abandoned.

The two servants who were accounted for, and who had escaped the fire in their night clothing, knew as little about it as did the people who had hastened out to the scene from the city.

They could disclose nothing; and, indeed, there was nothing to be disclosed that was not already apparent to the detective and to the others who were interested in the matter.

It was plain enough to the chief, to Nick Carter, and to his assistants that Creighton, upon escaping from the cell at headquarters, and from the building itself, had gone directly to his own home, and, after selecting such things as he wished to preserve, had deliberately fired his own home, and burned it to the ground, together with such things as he preferred to have destroyed, or was indifferent about.

That then he had gone in his car to Poplar Hall, had entered the house by his usual methods, and had compelled Emily and Torchy, and Emily's maid, to dress and accompany him away from there.

But where the man had gone, where he had taken his prisoners, or where, in what locality of that city, he had chosen to hide himself and his captives, remained not only a mystery, but a riddle which seemed to defy solution.

As daylight was breaking, Nick, with his two assistants and Demetrius Rackapolo, and the chief, seated themselves in a summerhouse that was too far removed from the fire to have been in any danger, to smoke and to discuss the matter.

"There are two or three very simple little puzzles connected with this affair," the chief remarked, "which, if we could find an answer to them, might suggest the solution of the one big puzzle."

"Go on, chief. What are they?" asked Nick Carter.

"Well, for one thing—it is a very small one, too—Creighton's car, that he used when he came from his own house to this place, would not hold more than three persons at the most. We know that two persons were in it when it came here——"

"Two? How do you make that out?"

"Creighton's Chinese servant, Wun Lung, was with him, of course. He needed that chap. In a way, he was invaluable to Creighton."

"I don't think I have heard about him," said the detective.

"No? Well, nobody ever did hear very much about him."

"Tell me about him later; but first, what were you about to say in connection with the car, and that it would carry but three persons at the most?"

"I was going to say this: Two persons came here in Creighton's car. Doubtless there was a trunk or two, also, and they would fill up the space of the rumble. So that the place for a third person would be occupied."

"That is likely."

"Well, there were three more persons to take away from here. How were they taken away?"

"Miss Morton had two cars here yesterday. I saw them when I was out here yesterday," said Chick. "The ruins of both of them are now in the burned garage."

"Precisely," said the chief. "Well, it would be impossible for five persons to ride in Creighton's small car."

"But three persons could ride in it, eh?" asked Nick.

"Yes; if the baggage did not occupy the room of the third one, in the rumble."

"We can suppose that one of the three sat upon that baggage, whatever it was, and it is not likely that there was very much of it."

"No."

"Of the five persons who went away from here after the fire was started," said the detective, "two were women—Emily and the maid Celeste—two were men—Creighton and the Chinaman—and one was a boy—Torchy. The Chinaman, I take it, is a small man, like most of his countrymen. Eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, Emily is a small woman; so is her maid. Torchy is an undersized boy. Creighton was the only heavy one in the party."

"That is right."

"The combined weight of the five would not make up more pounds than three big, heavy men—and that is what the car was intended to carry."

"Yes."

"Well," said Nick, "if I had such a load to convey from this place, between two and three o'clock in the morning—and that is when it happened—and if I had only that car you have described, of Creighton's, to do it with, I'd dispose of the load like this: I'd put Celeste on top of the baggage in the rumble, and tie her there, so she couldn't fall off, or jump off; I'd put Emily in the bucket seat next to me, and I'd put the boy on her lap, and fasten him there, so that neither of them could get out of that bucket seat; then I'd tell the Chink to hang on as best he could, and I'd go ahead. Or I'd order the Chink to walk, or catch a trolley, if I could trust him. Your first riddle is an easy one, chief. What is the next one?"

"The next one is not yet matured—quite," replied the chief. "It is just beginning to work, because daylight is upon us. It is this: How can Creighton expect to avoid observation, with that car of his, which is as well known in the city and all around this locality as his face? And if he had that load that you have described, to carry, the outfit must certainly have been seen. Ought we not to get trace of it in that manner?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, anyhow," said the chief, "I have taken precautions as to that. I have already sent one of my men to telephone all over the neighborhood. If the car is within a hundred miles of us now, it will be stopped."

"Well, what's the riddle?"

"The riddle is this: Is Creighton within a hundred miles of us now, or has he taken it into his head to light out entirely, now that he has got the girl and has burned his bridges—that is, his houses—behind him?"

"I think I can answer that one, too," replied the detective.

"Well?"

"Judging from appearances, we have decided that he left here about half-past two, eh?"

"Yes."

"That would give him, at the most, an hour and a half before daylight."

"Yes."

"You say that his car is a speedy one—a racer."

"It sure is, Carter."

"Well, if it is capable of seventy miles an hour, going light and stripped, it could not make over thirty-five or forty with the load it had to carry, and along these highways, with railway crossings and so forth to make."

"That's so."

"So I greatly doubt if he could be more than sixty miles away from this spot, by now, even supposing that he had used every effort to make as much distance as possible—which I do not, for one moment, suppose."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because your man Creighton is too foxy; he's too wise. He would know when he set the fires, that you would be on his trail in a jiffy. Nobody knows any better than he does the utility of the telephones, and how to head off a speeding car by that means. How many times do you suppose he has directed the same sort of thing himself since he has been inspector—eh?"

"True, Carter."

"Well, chief, if he had intended to go very far with his captives, he would not have set fire to this place. He'd have been content with burning his own, and he wouldn't have permitted you to discover that he had visited this one at all until natural developments revealed the fact, in the morning."

"I guess you're right about that, too."

"And so, you see, he had a hiding place ali picked out not far from here—one to which he could go easily after he left here, and in plenty of time to be well out of the way before we arrived here."

The chief nodded.

"That disposes of the second riddle," said Nick. "What is the next one?"

"Why in blazes did he take the maid, and the kid? Why didn't he content himself with Emily alone, as he did the other time he kidnaped her?"

"I'll give that one up," said the detective, smiling. "Perhaps it was a latent touch of chivalry that still clings to him."

"Huh!" grunted the chief, and lapsed into silence.

"Now, tell me about that Chinaman," Nick asked. "What do you know about him. It occurs to me that he may prove interesting—and perhaps valuable, also."

"How so?"

"I'll tell you that after you have informed me of all you know about him. But I will say this, now: I know Chinamen pretty well, chief. I have spent a good deal of time in China. I speak Chinese, and can talk with a Tartar or a Cantonese, a Mongol or a Manchurian, or any of them, with ease."

"Well," said the chief, "the fact is, I know very little about him, only that he has been the devoted servant of Creighton ever since I have known the man. Creighton brought him here with him. The fellow does not, or pretends that he does not, understand or speak a word of English. Creighton speaks the Chinese the same as you do."

"Chinamen are proverbially loyal to their masters," said Nick.

"So I have heard. I believe that this fellow is, but whether it is through love or fear I cannot say."

"You have visited Creighton's home and have seen the Chinaman there?" Nick asked.

"No. I have called there, and have been admitted as far as the parlor; nobody ever saw the real inside of Creighton's home, as far as I have been able to determine."

"Well, that doesn't matter. Did the Chinaman dress in his native fashion, or as we do?"

"Oh, he is a Chinaman, all through, save that he has no queue."

"What did he wear on his feet, chief, if you noticed?"

"Regular Chinese shoes, and rather ornate ones, too."

"Chick," said the detective, turning to his first assistant, "you used to be almost as good as an Indian at picking up a trail. That Chinaman must have walked, when he left here. It would not occur to him, or to Creighton, that they could be trailed in that manner. The dew is still on the grass. Creighton's car waited down there beside the road, close to the three elms. Let us see if we have forgotten our cunning in that sort of trailing. Come on. You, too, Patsy."

CHAPTER V.

NICK CARTER'S NEW IDEA.

"What are you going to do?" asked the chief, rising when the others did so.

"We are going to play at being little boys, for a time," replied the detective, with a smile. "We're going to play Indian. Weren't you ever a boy, chief, and didn't you ever play Indian?"

"You bet I have," was the hearty response. "I used to make bows and arrows, long knives, quivers, tepees, and all that; and twice I started to run away from home to go out West and slaughter the red men."

"I wonder what boy not raised in the crowded streets of a city has not done that very thing?" said Nick. "I feel sorry for city boys, chief; they never know what real fun is, do they?"

"No; not the real thing."

"Come along, then. We'll play at being boys again, and Chick and I will show you how an Indian trailer can pick up the track of a man and follow it, even where you could see next to nothing at all—that is, if there is any trail left to follow."

"You spoke about the dew on the grass," said the chief.

"Well, the dew was rather heavy last night. There is a lot of it on the grass yet, and it will last for another half hour or more. If the Chinaman took to the grass, and went across lots, we'll have little difficulty in following him for some distance."

"And if he kept to the road," said Patsy, "it will be easier, still, for a time, until——"

"Yes," said Nick. "Now, Demetrius, what will you do? Come with us? or do you prefer another route of your own?"

"I have never seen this method of Indian trailing," was the slow reply. "I am always anxious to learn; and, if I may say it, I, too, have seen some methods of trailing that I have observed rather closely."

The detective nodded; but the chief, who did not understand, asked:

"What was that, Demetrius?"

"I have worked under the orders of four Grand Viziers of the Sultan," Demetrius replied. "In my work as secret agent of the empire, I have visited many places in the world, and among them, the deserts. I know how the Arabs trail their enemies, and their friends, too, in the sands of the desert. Every little helps; perhaps I can be of service, since this seems to be the only manner by which we are apt to gain any clew of the direction taken by the former inspector."

They left the summerhouse together and went to the place beside the highway where three big elms grew near to the road. Nick Carter had already discovered, by certain unmistakable signs, that Creighton's car had waited there for him.

There had been, during the early hours of the preceding night, a light rainfall in that particular locality. Just such a rainfall as is spoken of generally by the wise ones as "being just enough to lay the dust."

Any person who knows the appearance of a public road in the country, after a rain that is "just enough to lay the dust," is aware that for hours afterward it will receive and retain every impression that falls upon it.

A raindrop that is larger than others will leave an impression that resembles a bullet hole in soft plaster; the print of a foot, the track of a hen, or a cat, or a dog, crossing the road, will remain until the sun dries the dust again, and the wind or other tracks obliterate it.

Dawn had just come; the sun was only just rising; there was no wind to speak of; the chances were that tracks could easily be followed, even upon the road itself, for a time, and Patsy suggested this idea; but not until after they had reached the elms, and he had studied the roadway a bit.

"One of the tires of Creighton's car has picked up a brass-headed, upholstery tack, somewhere, at some time," he said. "The tack, instead of making a bad puncture, has remained in the tire, and the head of it leaves its mark in the dust," he added. "What's the matter with following that?"

"Not a thing," replied the detective. "Do that, Patsy. See how far you can keep the track of it—and that, I think, is where Demetrius can be of aid."

"Yes," said the latter, "I will go with Mr. Garvan."

"Go ahead, then."

"There are no women's tracks around here," said the chief, looking about him.

"No," replied Nick; "because they got into the car from that side, where there is grass—and there are so many tracks here that one cannot distinguish one from another."

The detective waited until Patsy and Demetrius had started down the road on the trail of the automobile; then he turned to the chief.

"This won't interest you, chief," he said, "I'd like to make a suggestion, if you will take it."

"Sure. What is it?"

"We have two cars out here; Chick brought out one, and Patsy another, so we do not need yours. The suggestion is that you return to the city, to your office, and set the entire machinery of your department to work on this case. Pull every wire that you know how to pull, and that can be pulled from your office. Call every man before you who has ever done any special work for Creighton, and question all of them closely. One of them——"

"What for?"

"I was just about to tell you that. One of them may remember a word that Creighton has let drop in the past, that will give us a clew. It is not probable, but it is possible."

"All right. I'll do that."

"Set every man you talk with to questioning every other man on the force that he sees, about any bit of information that can be picked up concerning Creighton. Have each one reduce everything that can be remembered, to writing, and have it all delivered to you."

"Gee, Nick, that will be a lot."

"I know; but out of it all we may find one small suggestion that will repay you for all the trouble."

"It is worth trying."

"Of course it is. By the time Chick and I return to town, you ought to have a lot of stuff together for us to look over."

"But what will it all tend toward?"

"Chief, the manner of Creighton's escape from his cell demonstrates the one paramount fact that blazes up like a beacon in every move the man has made."

"What is that?"

"It is that he has been preparing, for years, to meet any and every emergency that might arise when things reached the pass where he could not live the double life any longer. He could not have escaped from that cell at headquarters in the manner he did, if he had not previously concealed a key to it—and if he concealed a key in that one, he did the same thing in every cell at headquarters. You admit that?"

"Yes."

"He could not have killed Barney Mackey without a weapon, so it follows that there was some sort of a dagger, or a knife, hidden with the key."

"Well, what has that got to do with the present circumstance?"

"This: If he prepared so ably for that event, it follows that he has prepared no less ably for others. This one, for instance. In other words, that he has prepared, somewhere in the city, or in the neighborhood of it, a place of refuge in which he has thorough confidence, where he can hide himself away in the utmost security—or, at least, he believes he can do so."

"Well?"

"The shrewdest man will let drop a remark here and there, which, if it is remembered, and considered, will afford a clew to what he is about; or he will be seen at one time or another, at some place and time where he did not wish, or expect, to be seen, and if that is remembered and considered, it will afford a possible clew. That is why I want the men all questioned."

"I should suppose, Carter, that we might look outside of the force for that sort of thing."

"Good. Certainly. Why not? Send out a general order, to each one of the precincts, directing each man on duty—and each man to go on duty for the next twenty-four hours or more, to put these three questions to almost every man he meets: First, 'Do you know Inspector Creighton by sight?' If that is answered in the affirmative, then these two: 'When and where, before to-day, did you last see him, or hear his name mentioned, and what was it that you saw and heard?' The third question is this: 'Where else have you seen him in the past, or heard his name mentioned, and what was it that you saw and heard?' "

"By Jove!" said the chief; "that is making a detective out of every man in the city, isn't it?"

"In a measure, yes; and it is likely to be productive of results. No man can go anywhere, without being seen by somebody. No man can talk very much without talking to another person than himself."

"But he may be seen, and he may talk, without being known."

"True; but a lot more people know who you are, than you would suppose. A lot of people know you by sight, who never saw you, but because they have seen your picture in the newspapers would know you if they should see you."

"That's as sure as shooting."

"And, with all due respect to you and the position you hold, Creighton has had about a hundred times more advertising in the papers than you have. It was his one weakness. He liked to make friends with the reporters, and to see his name in print."

"He did that, always."

"Well, chief, if he had a secret place to which to retreat when occasion should require—a place which he deems sufficiently secure to have taken his captive and his effects, his motor car, and himself and servant to, it is a dead sure thing that he has had to do a lot in getting it ready for his accommodation, when he should need it."

"And you can bet that in doing that, he has been mighty cautious, Carter."

"Of course; but somebody has seen him; somebody has talked with him; and that somebody or those somebodies, as the case may be, can be found!"

"You compel me to think that you are right about that, Nick."

"You have more than six thousand men under your orders. By the time it is dark, to-night, they can have questioned sixty thousand others. During the night they can add a hundred thousand to that number. By another twenty-four hours those three questions can be asked of nearly half a million people, and by the expiration of four or five days there will not be very many people in the city who have escaped the questioning."

"By Jove, Nick, it is a stupendous idea. It's a new one, too."

"Chief, if you get at it in the right manner, have a system about it and make it a very thorough one, I haven't a doubt that some sort of information will come of it. If not a direct clew, then something which will give us an idea out of which a clew will grow."

"I believe it, Nick. By jingo, I believe it. You go ahead with your trailing, here, and if I don't have those three questions put to every man, woman, and child in the city of Blank, before you are twenty-four hours older than you are now, I'll eat my hat."

"Good. That is the way to talk; and it can be done, chief."

"It can be done, and it will be done, too," was the reply.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAIL OF A PNEUMATIC TIRE.

"Do you really think that anything will come of that idea, Nick?" asked Chick, as soon as the chief had taken his departure.

"I regard it as quite likely that something may—may, mind you—come of it," was the reply. "You see the logic of it, don't you?"

"Sure; only it seems a stupendous undertaking; and then, again, most of the coppers who will put those questions are dubs, and won't understand how to make anything out of a good answer if they should get one."

"Leave that to the chief. I suggested that he have everything reduced to writing, you know."

"I know, yes; but the reports of six thousand——"

"Hold on a minute, Chick."

"Well?"

"If you should have that same first question asked of every man in the city, about the President of the United States, the reply would be, uniformly, in the affirmative, wouldn't it?"

"Approximately so; yes."

"Ask yourself why—and answer to me."

"Because every man who is a citizen, is more or less interested in the personality of the President."

"To be sure. Now—we will suppose that Creighton's picture has appeared in one or another of the newspapers of this city on the average of once a week for the last four or five years; possibly not a half, or a quarter as often as that, but we will say that."

"Well?"

"Ask yourself who would see his picture to remember who it represented; who would be interested to read what was printed in connection with the picture; and who would recall his features well enough from the pictures, to remember them."

"Those are impossible questions; but at haphazard, I should say, at a guess, one out of fifty, or a hundred."

"One out of a thousand, more likely, Chick. Only those who were interested, for any reason at all, in reading news about the police department, would give a reply that would be worth recording; so, you see, it would not be such a great task, after all. And now, we have another task to perform, right here."

"We can't trail the Chinaman from the road," said Chick. "There is no place here where we can pick up the trail."

"Well, if you were out in Nevada, where I found you so many years ago, Chick, how would you set about picking up the trail?"

"I'd circle——"

"Sure. Well, you go that way, and I will go this way. We will each take the tall grass where a good trail would be left in what remains of the dew. If you find it first, call to me."

The highway at that point ran almost directly east and west, and Patsy, with Demetrius, in following the tracks of the motor, had gone toward the east. The ruins of Poplar Hall were at the south side of the road, and so Chick and Nick searched at the north side—and after a time spent in vain seeking, found nothing.

"I don't know why I should have jumped at the idea that the Chinaman must have started southward," the detective thought to himself after a time; and without more ado, he crossed the road to the south side, and began the same sort of investigation.

And almost at once he found what he sought.

The light of the newly risen sun happening to strike just right upon the tall grass, from where Nick paused to look around him, revealed the unmistakable marks of the passage of some creature through it since the dew had fallen, and, as that creature could have been no other than the Chinaman, Nick called the signal to Chick, and they took up the trail together.

It led as straight toward the southward as a man could walk, passing the now destroyed mansion two or three hundred feet to the east of where it had been.

Somewhat less than a quarter of a mile farther on the trail turned abruptly, and at almost right angles, to the west, and so passed into a thick grove of maples that stood upon the land that had belonged to Morton, and was located directly behind the house and other buildings.

There, as Nick had feared might be the case, the trail was lost.

Beneath the branches of the trees no dew had fallen, and the ground gave forth no sign of a trail.

Still, neither of them spoke a word, but continued on across the grove, or, through it, is perhaps the better word.

Beyond the little wood was a plowed field over which a harrow had been dragged to make it ready for planting, and here they speedily took up the trail again, this time unmistakably, for the native shoes of the Chinaman had left unmistakable marks.

Beyond the plowed field they came to another road—a highway that was known locally as "the back road," and there it was evident that the Chinaman had seated himself at the top of the fence, and rolled and smoked no less than four cigarettes, for the stumps of them were there, the burned matches with which he had lighted them were there, and there was a small sprinkling of tobacco on the ground beneath where he had been seated.

The road, directly in front of them, was little traveled. It passed, just there, across a ledge of rock that cropped out of the ground, but to the right and the left, a few hundred feet away, grass grew between the wheel tracks.

"I'll go east, and you go west," the detective said to his assistant. "It is possible that we may pick up the trail again, although I hardly think it likely. It was only a chance, anyway, that we could follow it at all. But——"

He stopped, for Chick was pointing toward the east.

"There come Patsy and Demetrius," he said; and sure enough the two came into sight, and, seeing Nick and Chick, called to them.

"We followed the trail of the tires until it struck the rocks back there," said Patsy, when he joined them. "They couldn't get out of the road on either side, along here, so the car must have gone on toward the west; eh?"

From that point they followed along together nearly a mile, now and then, in spots, discovering evidences of the trail, but for the most part seeing nothing of it, and only satisfied that they were going right because they had passed no point where the car could have left the highway. In a bee line they were scarcely more than a mile from Poplar Hall, even then.

As they went along Patsy explained what had brought them there.

"The track of the car turned into a lane a mile or so east of the house," he said, "and followed through the lane to this back road. Creighton had to open two gates, one at each end of the lane, to pass through it. Then the car turned in this direction. I think we are chasing a wild goose," he added.

"Why?" asked Nick.

"Well, for one thing, Creighton left too plain a trail. It has looked to me all along as if he expected you to follow it, and wished to make it as plain as he could. Hello, there's another road—a north-and-south one, this time."

"And a traveled one, too," said Chick. "Here is where we lose the trail."

But it was not, as it proved.

At the corner they could see quite plainly the direction that the car had taken in making the turn. It had gone toward the north, and, although the marks of the tire were not nearly so plainly to be seen there, they could at intervals discover the impression of the brass-headed upholstery tack of Patsy's discovery, and they knew that they were taking the right direction.

Along this road there were frequent houses. It was like that highway upon which the dead banker had selected his place of residence; but there was no place where it appeared that the car had turned aside; and so they came, presently, after traversing another mile, to another highway that ran east and west.

Here, again, at the corner, the direction taken by the car was unmistakable, and a glance sufficed to assure them all that it had gone back toward the city, for that road, like the other one nearly two miles below it, led directly into the city limits and to the city itself.

"The thing that is puzzling me," said Patsy, "is this: Why did that Chink leave the car at all, and go afoot across lots to the back road, only to get into the car up there?"

"He didn't," replied the detective, with conviction. "We permitted ourselves to be misled by appearances, that is all. We took too much for granted, and followed along the road, simply because the Chinaman had waited there, on the fence, for the coming of the car."

"Eh?" said Patsy, turning his head a little to one side and regarding his chief.

"The Chinaman started out afoot, because, for some reason, Creighton did not want to carry him. Perhaps he had more baggage than we have reckoned on, and did not dare risk the car with so much weight. That is probably the idea."

"But why did he order the Chink to meet him on the back road?"

"The explanation of that is simple: He had set the house afire. The time was short before the light of the burning buildings would render it impossible to remain where he was without being seen. He wished to give more orders—some specific directions, possibly—to the Chinaman, and so he ordered him to cross to the back road, and wait there for him."

"Yes; and on the back road he was not only safe from observation, for the time, but he was also near enough to the burning house to see that the destruction of it was complete."

"But the point is," said the detective, "if the Chinaman made too much of a load for the car, down on the main road, he also made too much of a load for the car up there on the back road. We took it for granted that he got upon the car and came on with it, while, as a matter of fact, he probably continued on across lots."

"Uh-huh," said Patsy; and they all nodded acquiescence to this idea.

"Patsy," said the detective, after thinking for a moment, "you and Chick go back to the Hall and get the two cars. Bring them around this way, but don't wait for me. I shall no doubt make the rest of the distance to the city on foot.

"Demetrius, you can continue along this road, after the trail of the tire. Keep it as long as you can follow it, or until Chick or Patsy shall pick you up. I'll meet you all at the hotel, later."

"You are going back?" asked Chick.

"Yes; to the place where Wun Lung sat on the fence and smoked."

"I'm afraid it is too late now to pick up his trail, even if he crossed the road and continued on across lots at the opposite side of it. The dew is gone, and the——"

"I know. I shall try, however. There are more ways of following a trail than by footmarks; and it was getting toward daylight before that Chinaman could have reached the city, if that was where he was headed."

"Then we will meet at the hotel?"

"Yes. I shall probably be there by, or before, noon. If you chaps, or any of you, are not there by that time, it will be because something has delayed you; so, in that case, telephone in, with whatever news you may have."

"I should like to meet Creighton face to face," said Demetrius.

"Well, if you do," said Nick, "you have my permission to work out that vendetta you have against him and shoot."*

CHAPTER VII.

THE RETURN TO THE CITY.

"The speed of a fleet of warships is determined by the slowest vessel; the resisting qualities of any sort of protective arrangement is determined by its weakest point, and the ability of an habitual criminal to escape arrest is dependent entirely upon his silence."

The foregoing is the substance of the favorite maxim of that great policeman, Thomas Byrnes.

Nick Carter, on his way back to the place where the Chinaman had seated himself on the top rail of a fence to smoke cigarettes, considered the case in hand very carefully.

In the first place, he gave Creighton due credit for all the shrewdness and ability the man possessed, and he realized that this last escape from the cell at headquarters was only an added proof of the fellow's capabilities.

But, as the speed of a fleet of warships is only determined by that of the slowest of the craft that makes up its complement, so was the shrewdness, ability, and cunning of this outlaw to be determined by the cunning of the Chinaman.

For, it appeared without question that Creighton had taken the Chinaman into his confidence; he had shared at least some of his secrets with the Chinaman; and so Nick Carter convinced himself that this time it would be through the agency of the Chinaman that the final undoing of the ex-inspector would be brought about.

The chief of police had said that the Chinaman came to the country, or, at least, to the city, with Creighton, when he came there; and possibly the Celestial had always been in the confidence of his master.

But, until now, it had not been necessary for the Chinaman to go abroad much; he had been kept close to the house where he worked, and, furthermore, there had been no reason to suspect that he was otherwise than what he appeared to be.

But now it was different.

Creighton, his master, had become a marked man. There was, to use a common expression, a price on his head, and while the man's ability at disguising himself was conceded, it was certain that the Chinaman would now have to do much for his master that he had never been compelled to do before.

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*See No. 762, NICK CARTER WEEKLY: "The Mocker's Stratagem."

And so Nick Carter had reached the conclusion that the Chinaman was the weak point in the armor that Creighton had constructed around himself.

Creighton, personally, he did not hope to trace; but Creighton, through the Chinaman in whom Creighton had been forced to confide, he believed he could trace very soon.

In returning to that point along the back road where Wun Lung had seated himself on the fence to wait, Nick did not have any very great hope that he would be able to pick up the trail a second time. The dew had long since dried from the grass, and there was little likelihood that any trail that might be followed would be found anywhere now.

Still, as he had said, "There are more ways to follow a trail than by footprints."

It was decidedly worth the chance, to return and to know if there was any chance to pick up the trail again, or not. One of Nick Carter's maxims was always:

"Better a hundred false clews examined than one real clew neglected."

Nick seated himself upon the top rail of the fence, where he knew the Chinaman to have been seated.

He sought to put himself in the Chinaman's place for a moment—for there is no better method of thinking out the solution of a problem which another has created than that.

So first he imagined himself a foreigner, dressed in foreign costume, seated on the top rail of that fence, before daylight in the morning, waiting for the approach of an automobile.

The road ran approximately east and west, and, as the Chinaman had been seated there, he had faced more toward the east than the west, so he would have been able to see the gradual lighting up of the sky as the sun came nearer to its revelation.

It is said of Chinamen that they never get lost; that they can always return over the trail by which they have come to a place; also that they are infallible in following a direction that is given.

Well, the approach of the Celestial to the place where he waited demonstrated that last, for it was extremely doubtful if he had ever seen that locality before; and yet he had been able from the directions supplied, no doubt hurriedly, by Creighton, to cross from one highway to the other one in semidarkness.

But it had to be accepted as plain that, while Wun Lung sat upon the fence waiting, he had no idea of the direction he should take when he should leave there—save possibly a general one as to north and south, or east or west.

And so, seated there, he would be interested in scanning the various directions before him, as far as he had been able to see. He would be interested, too, in picking out a possible course in the direction he thought he would have to take.

Well, Nick sat there for a time, thinking upon the same points.

He decided that if he were in the Chinaman's place and had to go 'cross lots, straight ahead of him, presently, he would go so and so—picking out the easiest of the routes that appeared in view.

But the detective asked himself, why should the man have been directed across country at that hour in the morning when no other pedestrians would be abroad to see him, and when the highway was so much more easily traveled, and when directions given along the thoroughfare were so much more easily followed?

That settled it in the mind of the detective.

The rendezvous on the back road had been made only because of haste to get away from the scene of the fire; but once away from it, all the little arrangements for the final escape could easily be made.

"What would those arrangements be?" Nick asked himself. "If I were in Creighton's place, and had the Chinaman with me, what would I do? I know mighty well that the very first thing that I would do would be to cover up that Chink's costume, so that it would not be the very first thing that another person would see.

"With what? Why, with an automobile duster, naturally. Motoring goggles and a cap would hide that Oriental face. Good; then from here, after coming across the field and through the wood to meet the car here, he would take to the road—and it goes without saying that he would start away in the direction opposite that taken by the car.

"Wun Lung wore his native shoes when he crossed that field. Query: Why didn't Creighton force him to put on white-man's shoes, too? Answer: Because it never occurred to either of them that the Chinaman could not stick to the car until the end of the trip—wherever that end was to be.

"Well, that conclusion brought out another point: When Creighton left his own house, after setting it afire, and started for Poplar Hall, he went there with the intention of burning it down after he had made Emily Morton again his prisoner; but it wasn't at all likely that he had expected to find Torchy there, or that he had considered taking Celeste, the maid, with him in his flight.

"Therefore, the sudden decision to make the Celestial walk, until a place of meeting could be found, where there would be time to give him full directions; hence the easiest directions that could be given at the moment—to cross to the back road."

The detective got down from the fence and started along the road in the direction opposite that taken by the car when it had left that spot; in the direction from which Patsy and Demetrius had come when they arrived upon the scene and found Nick and Chick already there—for that was unquestionably the direction that the Chinaman must have taken when he left there.

Nick was satisfied that he would presently find one of two, or both of two things: The Chinaman, who had already proved himself to be a cigarette smoker—and a smoker of the kind that he rolled himself—would smoke on as he traveled, and there would be other stubs for him to throw aside before he had gone very far.

Again, there would be soft spots in the dust of the road, or in the sand beside it, where the Chinaman would leave footmarks; and footmarks pointing in that direction, at that hour in the morning, and with the toes turned slightly inward, much like an Indian's, could be made by no other than Wun Lung.

The detective had not traveled a hundred yards before he did find such a spot.

There, plainly to be seen, were the footprints of Patsy and Demetrius, headed in the opposite direction; and there, close to them, were other footprints, pointing toward the east, which could only have been made by the Chinaman.

And yet the Chinaman's Oriental shoes had not made those tracks; and still, no one other than Wun Lung could have passed that way to have made them; and so it followed that the ever-thoughtful Creighton had provided his servant with a different pair of shoes at that meeting on the back road.

Well, it did not matter to the detective whether Creighton had merely taken off his own shoes for the accommodation of his servant, or was provided with others; Nick was satisfied that he was on the trail.

He followed along it, rapidly, now and then pausing a moment to study the roadway, or again to devote a casual inspection to the stub of a burned cigarette.

He passed a corner where another unfrequented road crossed that one, but fortunately he found not only footprints, but another cigarette stump, which told him to keep straight on in the way he was going.

Nick would have selected that road had he had nothing to follow, for the reason that it led toward the city—and the detective had no idea that Creighton would try to hide himself away in the country.

A man is never so much alone as when he is without a companion in a crowd; a man can never hide himself away more effectually than by doing it among a veritable beehive of others of his kind.

The average criminal who hunts a deserted country house for a place of retreat is sure to be caught; but give that same criminal a house with two or three entrances and exits, located in a crowded section of the city, and he may almost defy arrest—unless he is betrayed.

It may seem to the reader that this process of trailing the Celestial is long drawn out, and partially unnecessary; but it is deemed important here as showing the manner in which the detective worked out his theories.

He did not for a moment believe that he could follow the trail of the Chinaman after the latter approached nearer to the city. It would be lost, then, in the maze of other trails; but he would have satisfied himself that Wun Lung had returned to the city, and wherever the Chinaman had gone, it was safe to assume that Creighton, with his captives, would ultimately be found.

Then, again, there was the car.

Creighton was too wise to have made the attempt to travel very far with that car, being thoroughly aware, as he was, of the ease with which fleeing cars are headed off and stopped in transit these days.

Remember, it was still very early in the morning.

In a great city like that one, and in the outskirts of one, people are always astir; but if there is a quiet, "nothing-doing" hour in the daily life of a metropolitan center, it is at that time in the morning when milkmen and bakers' boys are astir, delivering their wares, and when the denizens of the underworld, perceiving the approach of daylight, have slunk away into their hiding places.

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER ADOPTS NEW TACTICS.

"Chief," said Nick Carter, to the chief of police, late that afternoon, in the private office of the latter, "I want you to tell me some more about that Chinaman, Wun Lung."

"Eh? More about him?" replied the chief. "Why, Carter, I think I have told you already all that I know about him."

"Possibly you have, and again possibly you have not. You know, sometimes we know things which we do not realize that we do know."

"Oh, yes, there is no business that teaches us that axiom so well as the police business. But why are you so interested in the Chink?"

"That will appear later on. Just now I want you to answer me a few questions."

"If I can. What are they?"

"How many times have you seen Wun Lung?"

"Three, I think."

"Where have you seen him?"

"Twice at Creighton's house; once in this office, when Creighton sent him to me on an errand."

"I understood you to say that he does not speak English."

"Neither does he; but that does not prevent him from delivering a written message and taking back a reply."

"No."

"That was what brought him here."

"Has he any peculiarities as to his personal appearance?"

"No. Unless it is that he is about the tallest Chinaman I ever saw."

"Oh; he is tall, is he? How tall?"

"Just about as tall as I am."

"That is about an even six feet, isn't it?"

"Half an inch more than that, in my stockings."

"By the way, while we are on that subject, what was Creighton's official measurement, as to height, in this department?"

"Six feet one and a quarter inches."

"Is Wun Lung fat, or lean?"

"Neither. Just well put up. Rather an athletic Chink, I thought him."

"Now, as to his features."

"Oh, he looked very much like any other Chink, only he wore no queue."

"And he always dressed in his native costume, I think you said?"

"He was so dressed whenever I saw him."

"Well, like a laundryman, or like a well-to-do Chinaman?"

"Neither the one nor the other. Rather like one of the moderately circumstanced Chinese merchants down in Chinatown."

"Any scars, or other notable things about him?"

"No. Not that I noticed."

"Hands all right? No fingers gone, or anything like that?"

"There was a scar, like a burn, on the back of his left hand. I remember that; and, also, now that you speak of these things, I assumed that he was left-handed."

"Why?"

"I don't remember just why; but that was the impression I got somehow."

"There is nothing else about him that you can think of, chief?"

"No. Why are you so interested in him, Carter?"

"Because I am convinced that when we find Creighton the Chinaman will be instrumental in it."

"Perhaps. You haven't told me yet what you succeeded in doing in that trailing of him that you undertook this morning."

"We succeeded only in tracing the Chinaman, and the car as well, back to this city. I have already intimated as much."

"Do you mean that you think Creighton will remain here?"

"For the present; yes. I haven't a doubt of it."

"Then he will keep mighty still while he is here."

"Possibly he will, and perhaps he will not. But we cannot let much time elapse before we find him."

"Heaven knows I don't want to let much time elapse; but it strikes me that we are going to have a harder job this time than we did the last one. He was gone from here less than twenty-four hours the other time."

"I know."

"I suppose your idea of haste is due to the fact that he has Emily Morton in his power, Carter."

"Yes. She is in great danger. I don't know just what to fear, for her—but——"

"The fact that he took the maid along with them will afford some sort of protection for Emily, don't you think?"

"Let us hope so."

"And Torchy, too. The presence of the boy will be some help to her, in more ways than one."

"I'm not so sure of that. To tell you the truth, chief, I am about as much concerned about that lad as about Emily. Creighton is apt to knock him on the head, just to get rid of him; particularly if the boy is bothersome."

"Well, what do you propose to do about it all, Carter?"

"I don't know. I shall not determine anything until to-night."

"Why to-night? What do you look for by that time?"

"For one thing, I expect something to develop from that suggestion I made to you, about having strangers in the streets questioned with the three questions. I suppose you gave orders about that, didn't you?"

"Certainly; at once."

"Well, when my assistants came in with their report about the trailing of the car, I sent them out in three different directions. I am having three different sections of the city searched by them—and I am going, myself, to look into a fourth one."

"There cannot be very much found during the day, can there?"

"The daytime is the best for the sort of searching that I have instituted."

"Have you any objections to telling me what parts of the city you have reference to?"

"No. I have sent Demetrius among the Greeks, the Syrians, the Turks, and the Eastern people generally. He will know where to find them, he knows how to pass himself off as belonging to any of them, and he can disguise himself as perfectly as I can do it."

"Well?"

"Chick and Patsy will make the rounds of the several Italian quarters of the city."

"I see. It strikes me that you have left out one of the most important sections of the lot; one to which we were just now referring by implication."

"You refer to Chinatown?"

"Yes."

"I have reserved that for myself."

"Oh! I see."

"Chief, I perhaps know this town almost as well as you do."

"I haven't a doubt of it. Your business has brought you here a good many times."

"Yes; and one of the sections I know quite well is your Chinatown. That is why I laid so much importance to the questions I was asking you just now about Wun Lung."

"Were you thinking of impersonating him?"

"No. I could not, if I desired to do so. He is too tall; much taller than I; but I don't want to impersonate him."

"Then what?"

"Nothing particular as to that. But the point is that I have several very good friends among your Chinatown residents. Lee Dick, for one, and he is influential, as you know."

"Yes; and unquestionably the best Chink I ever knew. But what will he do for you as against his own countrymen?"

"Not a thing, as against them, as a class; but as against one here or there, who is a criminal, and therefore a disgrace to all good Chinamen anything in reason that I ask him to do. I have not decided as yet just what I will ask him to do. That will be determined by events."

"I think I understand you. If it is necessary, you will get Lee Dick to vouch for you."

"Exactly."

"And you mean to play Chink yourself, eh? To make up as one."

"Precisely."

"It won't be the first time you have done that sort of thing, will it?"

"No, indeed. Now, what time can I see the first reports that you will receive from the questions that are to be asked to-day?"

"I'll get the first batch of answers in this office between seven and eight to-night."

"That will do very nicely. Now, I don't want to come here to see them, and I do want to see them with my own eyes."

"Well, I can send them to you, I suppose, if you will tell me where, and when."

"I'll send Chick here, at half-past six, to go over them with you. He will help you to cull out those which I will care to see; those which may have a significance; see?"

"Yes."

"Then, if you will let Chick have them, he will take them to me, wherever I happen to be at the time he leaves here."

"He will know where to find you?"

"Of course."

"You will keep me posted upon what you are doing?"

"Whenever there is anything to post you about—yes."

"Nick, have you any suggestions to make in regard to the Detective Bureau, or the force in general?"

"No; except the one I have already made about the questioning process, go right ahead as if I were not in the city. Let the acting head of the bureau have his way about whatever he wants to do. For once, change the general plan of campaign, and give full publicity to everything that is connected with this affair. Make every man in the city a policeman, so far as the running down of Creighton is concerned. Call the reporters in here to you and issue a statement which they will be glad to publish to the effect that you call upon every citizen to assist in the arrest and conviction of this dangerous criminal who is now at large, and who does not hesitate at arson and murder in his acts.

"Publish the fact that Creighton has served much in foreign countries before he came here to go on the police force; say that he has served in Egypt and in China, in Japan and in India, in Italy and throughout Europe. Call upon all foreign residents to assist you in his capture—and state that any information given to you in confidence will be preserved in confidence, although you will act upon it.

"Stir the whole city up with the desire to catch that one man, who is as dangerous, at large in the city, as a man-eating tiger is dangerous near a village of children."

"Huh! You don't expect that to capture him, do you?" the chief asked, not without irony.

"No; but Creighton will read it, and it will startle him."

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN THAT CAME BACK.

During the night that followed, Creighton did some daring things.

Three houses—residences, all of them—in widely separated sections of the city, were entered and robbed; and in each one of them Creighton pursued the same tactics that had been his when he was known only as Mawker, the burglar, and when he had been facetiously called The Mocker.

Just why he should have retained his usual habits of procedure does not appear, for it was no longer necessary for him not to speak, since his identity had become known; nor was it longer incumbent upon him to wear the hooded mask—but he did so, nevertheless.

"There is something in that," the detective decided to himself, when he was told about it by the victims of the three robberies, all of whom had seen the burglar when he visited their homes. "It does not appear just yet what the reason is; but that there is one—and a good one, too, so far as Creighton is personally concerned, goes without saying. Otherwise he would not give himself the necessary trouble."

All of which was quite true, and was in keeping with a theory that the detective had formed, which had sent him into Chinatown the preceding afternoon to make a compact with that Lee Dick to whom reference has already been made; which had caused him to send Chick and Patsy and Demetrius into other sections of the city as well.

There was one departure from the usual custom of The Mocker, however.

Before his identity became known as Creighton, the inspector of police, he had been careful to leave no trace behind him other than that he permitted himself to be seen in his disguise; but now, in each of the three houses he robbed that night, he wrote upon a mirror with soap, this legend:

"With the compliments of 'The Man That Came Back.'"

And so, oddly enough, each of the afternoon papers, which told of the three affairs, used the expression as a headline; and all the city soon began talking, not without a touch of satirical humor, of "The man that came back."

Pugilists say that a man, once out of the game, cannot come back; Marathon runners will tell you the same. Charles Courtney, the once famous oarsman, would tell you the same; but here was a man who was at a harder game than any of them who claimed that he had come back, and who, by intense activity, was endeavoring to prove it.

During the early part of the night immediately preceding these last burglaries, Chick, according to the arrangement made, had gone to the chief of police and received from him the written reports of the men on the force in reference to the questions that had been asked of Tom, Dick, and Harry during the day.

He had taken them to Nick at the appointed place, which proved to be the parlor at the rear of Lee Dick's store, in Chinatown.

Chick, when he sought Nick, with the reports in his possession, was disguised as a Chinese laundryman, although an hour earlier he had been in another part of the city in the character of an Italian. He found Nick Carter, also dressed as a Chinaman, and enjoying the hospitality of Lee Dick.

Chick and the chief of police had culled from the mass of statements that had been received thirty-seven which they believed the detective would care to see.

Upon looking them over, Nick Carter quickly threw aside all but four of the thirty-seven; and without giving them literally it may be said that the four replies pointed to the unspoken theory that had been in the mind of the detective ever since he had begun the trailing of Wun Lung that morning.

We will discover what that theory was in the conversation that Nick had with Lee Dick soon after the arrival of Chick, and immediately after he had finished going over those thirty-seven replies to the questions.

"Dick," he said, turning to his Chinese friend, "when I came in here, dressed as one of your own countrymen, I told you that I needed your assistance, and that I would tell you just how you could aid me, as soon as my assistant arrived."

Lee Dick nodded his head in acknowledgment of this statement.

"I believe it is your habit, Dick, to read the morning papers, in English, every morning, isn't it?"

"Both morning and evening papers, Mr. Carter."

"Then you know all about Inspector Creighton, don't you?"

"I have read the reports."

"Well, they are all true enough."

"So I surmised, Mr. Carter."

"Do you know Creighton by sight, or have you a speaking acquaintance with him?"

"Both."

"Have you often seen him in this part of the city?"

"Frequently."

"When did you see him, in this neighborhood, the last time?"

"Just twelve days ago, if we count the days as beginning at about this hour."

"Where did you see him then, and what was he doing?"

"I saw him in the street in front of my door. He was passing through the neighborhood, and he stopped a moment to speak to me."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes."

"In uniform?"

"No; in citizen's dress."

"Have you known that he kept a Chinese servant? One named Wun Lung?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that servant?"

"No; not personally. I have an acquaintance who does know him—Charlie Sam, by name; but Wun Lung comes very rarely to this part of the city."

"He has not made many friends down here, among his countrymen, then?"

"Very few."

"How do you account for that?"

"I have not attempted to account for it."

"Well, make the attempt now."

The Chinaman shrugged his shoulders expressively, and replied:

"There are men and men, in my country, as well as in this one; there are men who prefer to hold themselves aloof, and men who prefer the company of their kind; just as there are men who seek one sort of company, and men who seek another sort. For instance, I do not seek confidants among the class of my own countrymen with whom Charlie Sam mingles." Another expressive shrug completed the statement.

"In other words," said the detective, smiling, "they represent a different tong from the one to which you claim allegiance; eh?"

There was absolutely no reply to that question by motion, expression, or in words.

"I won't touch upon that subject, Dick," said the detective, still smiling. "I know perfectly well that it is a delicate one. But the point is, will you help me to catch the ex-inspector? You know that I want him, and you know why. Can I count upon you?"

There was just a slight pause of hesitation before the Chinaman replied; then, he said:

"If I may do it in my own way—yes."

"Do you think, by adopting what you call your own way, that Creighton could be caught?"

"Yes."

"What do you call your own way, then? What is to be done?"

"Mr. Carter, my friend, you will understand me when I tell you that I cannot go into the subject, or discuss it with you at all, in the presence of a third person; not even when I know that third person to be your trusted assistant, and one whom I would not hesitate to trust myself. But I cannot do it. We must be alone together; then I will talk."

The conversation had been in English. Lee Dick, as has been seen, was an educated man; indeed, he was a graduate of Columbia College.

Chick left his chair on the instant when the last remark was made.

"Here is where I escape," he said, with a light laugh.

"I hope that you have taken no offense," said Lee Dick tentatively.

"Offense? Certainly not. Any orders, Nick?"

The Chinaman interrupted.

"Before you reply to that question of your assistant, Mr. Carter," he said, "I would like to suggest that if you determine to pursue this matter in what I have called my own way, it will be very necessary that you should utterly disappear, personally, from the sight and knowledge of your acquaintances in this city; and also that it should be made to seem that you have not disappeared at all. If you can accomplish that seemingly impossible thing, I think that the rest of it will be comparatively easy."

Nick Carter nodded with understanding; so did Chick, for they both partly comprehended what Lee Dick meant.

"Yes," said the detective, turning again to his assistant, "I have some orders, but not exactly the ones I expected to give you, Chick."

"I'm on," replied Chick; "only, just how are we going to do it?"

"In this way: Dick will provide you with a costume precisely like the one I am wearing now; it is rather better than the one you have on."

"I should say so."

"You can carry it under your arm when you leave here. Presently you will return to the hotel in your own person as Chick. You will announce at the desk that you are leaving the city to-morrow—called away on another case. Tell Bulger, the clerk at the desk, and say it so that any one standing around near at hand will hear it."

"Yes. I understand. Then, to-morrow, some time in the early afternoon, say, I go to the station, and you go with me, to see me off. Then you return to the hotel, and I am on my way to New York. Then what next?"

"You go all the way to New York. You return to this city by the first train out after you have had an opportunity properly to disguise yourself. You seek me at the hotel, dressed in the costume that Lee Dick will give you. In my room, we change places. That is all."

The eyes of Lee Dick sparkled.

"Let me understand it," he said.

"Yes? Well?" the detective replied to him.

"You mean, do you not, that, although it will be your assistant who will arrive at the hotel in the character of a well-to-do Chinaman, it will be yourself who will come away from it as that character?"

"Yes."

"And that your assistant will remain there, representing you? Made up to resemble you? That he will play the part of Mr. Nicholas Carter, while you return here, to me, as you are now?"

"Precisely."

"Can it be done? I mean, can your assistant perform his part so that it will not be suspected?"

"Dick, if he should come here, representing me, you would not know the difference."

"Good. In that case I can help you—and I will help you, Mr. Carter."

"Thank you, Dick. You have never failed me yet; I don't think you will do so now. Skip along, Chick. I'll be back to the hotel in an hour or so, and then we will begin the new game; and it begins to look very promising. I'll talk with Dick a while longer, to perfect the plans, and then I'll follow along."

CHAPTER X.

A SECRET OF A CHINESE TONG.

"Now," said the detective to his Chinese friend, as soon as they were alone together, "tell me just what you meant by that expression, a little while ago, when you said that you would help me to catch Creighton, if you could do it in your own way. I think that I partly understand you, but not entirely so."

"Mr. Carter, please understand that there is not another man living, even among my own countrymen, for whom I would do what I propose to do for you now."

"I appreciate that, Dick."

"Once you saved my life; once, at another time, you did even more than that for me. What I shall do now is partly in recognition of those services, partly because of the honor and esteem in which I hold you, and partly because I feel that I will be doing right in helping you to rid the world of a disreputable character."

"Say, rather, of the most despicable scoundrel who ever lived," said Nick.

"You have a maxim in your own language, Mr. Carter, which says, 'To do a great right, do a little wrong.' In my own religion we transpose that saying, and express it: 'A small wrong becomes right when by doing it a great purpose is accomplished.' It is the same."

'Yes."

You have told your assistant that you will leave here presently to return to him at the hotel."

"Yes."

"Some time to-morrow you will return here again in the character you now represent."

"Yes."

"You can readily pass among any of my countrymen as a Chinaman. You have already done that; you must continue to do it until this matter is settled."

"I guessed that, Dick."

"You will be in danger, all the time, while you remain here in that character, for I——"

"I am somewhat accustomed to danger. I do not underestimate it; neither do I overestimate it."

"I know. But in order to help you it will be my duty to have you taken into the tong to which Charlie Sam belongs. When once you are there, among those people, there will not be a moment—not even an instant, when you will not be in imminent danger; and if those persons, with whom you will be brought into contact, should ever suspect you, you would be shot down, or stabbed, on the instant; in the back, as well as any other way."

"I understand. But——"

"Well?"

"I did not suppose that you were a member of that tong, Dick."

"I am not."

"Then how can you take me into it?"

"There are ways of accomplishing things that seem impossible, Mr. Carter."

"I know. I should not have asked that question."

"I will reply to it, nevertheless."

"You need not unless you care to do so."

"It is as well that you should understand."

"All right."

"That tong and the one to which I belong have long been at war; they have both been in existence for centuries. It has been necessary, during those centuries, that each of us should have spies in the camp of the other. Many years ago, in my own country, I was such a spy. After I came here it was found necessary that I should withdraw from participation in that sort of thing, and so I was told to instruct another, who was sent to me, in the hazardous work. That other has been at work only a short time, for he has succeeded others who came here before him; but he will be able to take you into the tong, nevertheless—after I have thoroughly instructed you, as I shall do, here in this room, to-morrow night."

"But, Dick, am I to understand that by getting the admission to that other tong I will be able to get a line on Creighton?"

"You will be brought into contact with Wun Lung."

"Ah! I see."

"I know him to be a member of it. He attends all their conclaves. Your own sagacity must inform you of what is to be done, after you have accomplished a meeting with him."

"But that name—Wun Lung—is not a Chinese name. It is a name given in derision."

"His name is Long Low Wong. The name he uses came from saying Wong Long, but he is on the books as Long Low. His father was a mandarin. He is an educated man, and speaks many languages—English, for example, as fluently as I do; or you. More than that, he is the—what you would call the presiding officer of his tong, and at its conclaves he has the power of life and death over every member present."

"I had no idea that they went as far as that in their authority," said the detective.

"You will find, before you have gone far, that you have many things to learn about the Chinese tongs, Mr. Carter."

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"You will have to be on your guard every minute of the time, from the moment you open your eyes in the morning till you close them again at night; from the time you do close them at night, until the moment of awakening. Sleeping or waking, you will never be out of danger of discovery for an instant; and discovery means—death."

"Well, I can face that possibility. Now, you have got something more up your sleeve, my friend. What is it?"

The Chinaman permitted himself to smile.

"It is you," he said, "who have something up your sleeve, as you express it. When I told you just now that you would encounter Wun Lung there, at the meetings of that tong, your eyes lighted up as though you were well pleased; and at the same time they clouded, as if with a sudden thought of apprehension. I think I read the meaning of that apprehension, Mr. Carter, and understood what it meant."

"You are a shrewder man than I supposed, Dick," smiled the detective.

"One does not live in the midst of intrigue, and direct a great tong, as I have done for years, without wisdom," was the calm reply. "You suspected that Wun Lung is not always Wun Lung, did you not?"

"Yes."

"You suddenly remembered that the inspector was in China many years; that, perhaps, he is as expert as you are in representing a Chinaman; that he has a devoted Chinese servant, who is also presiding officer of his tong; that that servant might instruct his master in the secrets of the tong, as I shall instruct you in them; that the master might, for some unknown reason, sometimes impersonate the servant at the tong; and that if such happens to be the situation, there is always the possibility that the shrewd eyes and understanding of Mawker, the burglar, alias Inspector Creighton, will see through your disguise and recognize you."

"I can only repeat what I have just said; that you are shrewder than I supposed, Dick," said the detective.

"Since we have been discussing these things, Mr. Carter, I have had those same thoughts in regard to that man."

The detective nodded.

"It is more than possible; it is extremely probable," he said. "Creighton is playing a deep game. I begin to think that I am on the track of his hiding place."

"Here in Chinatown?"

"Yes."

"Probably."

"It would explain, in part, why he returned to the city as soon as he did. But, if he is hiding himself away down here, he is impersonating a Chinaman all the time, not part of the time. I wish I knew that Wun Lung by sight."

"You do not?"

"No. I have never seen him. Practically all that I know about him is that he is very tall; as tall a man as Creighton, or nearly so, in fact."

"There are many tall Chinamen, Mr. Carter. The Mongols, the Tartars, are tall men. Only the Cantonese and the people from the southern parts of the empire are small men."

"Yes. I know."

"I could point out a hundred Chinamen in this district who are as tall as Long Low."

"Well, it is his height that renders it convenient for Creighton to impersonate him, if that is what is being done."

"To-morrow night, when you come here, you shall have an opportunity to see Long Low, or Wun Lung, as you have known of him."

"At the tong? Shall I go there as soon as that?"

"No. You cannot visit there until the night following; but I will be able to take you to a place where you may see the man, although you may not hear him."

"What do you mean? Not hear him?"

"I shall take you to a place where you can look in upon the meeting of the tong, and, no doubt, he will be there. I shall do it more to post you about the arrangement of the great room where the meeting is held, and that you may observe their ceremonies, than for other reasons; but I have no doubt you will see Long Low there."

"But why can I not hear, also?"

"Because you will be so far removed from the scene that it will be impossible; but you will be enabled to see plainly enough, because of an arrangement of mirrors that I instituted myself."

"Do you mean to tell me that there is a meeting of the tong every night?"

"The lodge is opened every night, for twenty-four hours, Mr. Carter, and so every twenty-four hours it has to be reopened. The regular meetings, when all members try to attend, are Sunday nights."

"And to-morrow night will be Sunday night. I had forgotten that. Dick, do you suppose that you can post me up sufficiently well in the short time we will have so that I will get through all right?"

"I think so."

"Now, another question."

"Well?"

"Is there any way by which you can pick up any added information about Long Low and Creighton in the meantime?"

"I do not know. It is doubtful; but I will make the effort."

"In your capacity as a former spy—which I suspect you are still—for your own tong, as against that other one, you should have a number of men at your beck and call; eh?"

"Perhaps; but do not count upon them. I must not appear to be interested in any special persons, or things, if I would serve you best. My wishes must be understood to be general in their character. My own people will suppose that you are merely another spy who has been sent here. The danger is that the other people may have the same ideas about you, Mr. Carter."

"Not a pleasant thing to contemplate, eh?" said the detective.

"No. If you are discovered, an extremely unpleasant one," was the reply.

"Well, if you can get a line on Creighton to-day, do it. I will be going now. But, Dick, I want you to bear in mind the fact that he has a captive in his power, who should be rescued with as little delay as possible."

CHAPTER XI.

A REVELATION OF TWO PLANS.

As the reader already knows, Creighton was busily engaged in playing his old game, even at the time when Nick Carter and Lee Dick were discussing their plans.

In the upper part of the city he was committing the three burglaries which have already been referred to, the report of which was to startle the city in the morning.

There was no doubt that they were committed out of pure bravado, rather than from motives of cupidity; he wanted the people of the city, where he had lorded it over them with his authority as a police official, to know that he was up and doing, and still among them, even though he had become an outlaw with a price on his head.

As the chief of police expressed his opinion of the burglaries of that night, "they were pure 'sass;' nothing else; Creighton just wanted to let you know that he is alive."

But, strange as it may seem, there was one thing in connection with the commission of those three burglaries that was reassuring to Nick Carter; and it was the fact, to which reference has already been made, that Creighton, in committing them, wore the same disguise that he had inevitably worn as Mawker, before it became known that Mawker and the acting head of the Detective Bureau were one and the same.

Just that little thing which was expressed in the wearing of the hooded mask that came down over his head until it rested upon his shoulders, and the gloves with the palms and the insides of the fingers cut from them, confirmed Nick Carter in the ideas he had formed concerning the hiding place of Creighton, even before his long talk with Lee Dick.

They confirmed it in this manner:

He was convinced, now, that the hiding place of Creighton was somewhere in that part of the city alled Chinatown; that Creighton's disguise was that of a Chinaman; that Creighton had long schooled himelf in the part that he had to play to carry out the deception, and that the man had taken his schooling from that servant of his who was known variously as Wun Lung and as Long Low.

But more than all Nick was convinced that Creighon, in adopting that disguise, had adopted it permanently, and with no thought of laying it aside again; at least, not while he remained in the neighborhood of the city where he was so well known.

That accounted for the presence of the disguise of the former Mawker. Why? Because that disguise concealed the man entirely from view, and those who saw him could not tell whether he was black, or white, or yellow beneath it.

Nick believed that he read the plot of the man, as t was now, deeper than any he had yet attempted. Put yourself in Creighton's place for a moment, and hen in Nick Carter's place, too, as Nick Carter studied he situation, and you will understand perfectly how he detective reasoned it out.

Consider Creighton's career in that city. Remember that he had for years lived the two lives of a prominent police official and a daring burglar, and that he was almost equally well known in each of the parts he played.

Consider that he kept a Chinese servant, whom he had been in the habit of impersonating from time to time, merely for the purpose of studying the part, and of becoming so perfect in it that when the time should come for him to adopt it permanently there would not be a question raised concerning his identity with the Chinaman.

Consider that for many months, possibly for several years, he had been in the habit of visiting Chinatown disguised as Long Low, until the real Chinamen who lived there, and who knew him as such, had no idea that he was other than their countryman.

Consider, even—for it is entirely in keeping with Creighton's other arrangements—that the real Long Low had never been permitted to return to Chinatown at all after the first few visits there to establish himself; that Creighton had always gone there in his place and stead, until Creighton, as Long Low, was better known down there than Long Low himself would have been.

Consider just one more thing—the most important one of all—and you will understand how the detective silently worked out his theory even before he went to Lee Dick for full confirmation of it. It is this:

That when the time came when there was no further escape for Creighton, save that one of utterly losing his identity, he decided to adopt the identity of the Chinaman permanently; that to do that he first burned his own house, taking away with him only a few things that he could carry in the rumble of his small car; that before that night of the flight was over, when he had burned two houses, he got the real Long Low out of the way entirely, perhaps by sending him back to China, so that later on there could be no confusion of identities, and that he stained his own entire body with a stain that would not come off, and otherwise changed himself so that he could pass the most rigid sort of examination before any persons who were not physicians and experts, without a suspicion that he was not a Chinaman.

There you have it.

With Wun Lung, alias Long Low, out of the way, and not in evidence anywhere; with Creighton made up in the part and playing it all the time, living in Chinatown, where he had established himself not only as a person, but as the local head of a prominent Chinese organization, there would be little chance of confusing the former servant with the master, even in the event that the supposed former servant should be arrested and tried for a supposed complicity with the doings of his former master.

For, if Creighton, in the disguise as his own former servant, should be arrested as that servant, there could be nothing proved against him, and the authorities would be obliged to liberate him.

And so Creighton would go free after all, and right in the community where he had done so much to break the law.

We think that we have made this theory of the detective's quite clear now.

When he left Lee Dick that night he had decided in his own mind that:

Wun Lung, alias Long Low, the real Chinese servant of Creighton, had disappeared, probably sent back to his own country, perhaps merely sent to another part of this country—possibly put out of the way altogether; that:

Creighton was living somewhere in Chinatown in the character of his former servant, having adopted it permanently; that:

He lived in a house in Chinatown where he had been known among those people to have lived right along for two or three years, or more, and where he had, therefore, established his identity so thoroughly as Long Low that there could be no question of it, and no fault in the proofs that he could supply in support of it; that:

In allying himself with the most powerful, and the most murderous tong among the Chinese of that city, and in gradually bringing himself, by his superior talents, to the head and control of it, he had intrenched himself behind safeguards over which it would be next to impossible to climb; that:

Thousands of Chinaman stood ready not only to swear to him, to his identity, and to his permanent living among them, but to fight for him, and to avenge him, if that should become necessary; and lastly, that:

To that house somewhere in Chinatown which he had made his home, and where he was as safe from pursuit as it was possible to be anywhere, he had taken his two captives, Emily Morton and Torchy, to do with them as he pleased, and with no man to say him nay.

That was the situation as Nick Carter viewed it when he parted with Lee Dick that night; that was the situation which was supported by the revelations of the morning, in reference to the three burglaries that had been committed during the night; that was the situation when, shortly before noon that Sunday, he went with Chick to the railway station and ostentatiously bade him good-by, while he turned himself to retrace his steps to the hotel.

That was the situation when, ten hours later—or a little more than that—one of the hallboys at the hotel went to Nick Carter's room with a card upon which had been written in English—and down in one corner, also in Chinese characters—the name Men Gee Chang.

And right there, in the reception of that card, was where the detective had a small part to carry out. It was necessary to deceive even the hallboy, to a certain extent, so that the hallboy would do some talking downstairs.

Nick held the card in his hand for a moment, studying it. Then he looked at his watch. Then he said:

"It is ten o'clock at night. Who is this man, boy?"

"Just a Chink, sir. He's a swell, though. He ain't no laundryman," was the reply.

"Oh, well, I don't think that I care to see him. Did he say what his business is?"

"He said to tell you that his business is important, and that he won't keep you very long."

"Oh, well, I may as well see him. Bring him up."

And so, Chick, disguised as a Chinaman, was ushered into Nick Carter's room in the hotel; and no sooner were the two detectives alone together than they got extremely busy.

We need not describe the detail of the changes that were made between them; readers of the Nick Carter histories have seen Chick impersonate Nick Carter so often that they know how perfectly he could do it—and why should he not do it perfectly, since he had practiced it for years?—and they already know how quickly Nick could assume the disguise of a Chinaman.

The result of it was that within half an hour from the moment Chick was shown to the room, the two had changed places.

If that hallboy had returned to the room then, and looked at the two men, he would have been unconscious of any change.

To all appearances the Chinaman he had taken to the room, and the man who had received that Chinaman, pretending not to know him, would have been the same; and yet the fact remained that they had changed places; that Nick Carter was now the Chinaman who had called at the hotel and sent a card to the detective; and that the Nick Carter who was in the room with him was the "Men Gee Chang" who had called.

And so, although it appeared as if Nick Carter remained at the hotel when the Chinaman took his dearture, the truth was that Nick Carter went forth rom the hotel disguised as the Chinaman while Chick emained.

The reader must understand that all of this was done o satisfy the demands of Lee Dick, who could not aford to have it suspected that the Chinaman he was bout to introduce into a certain society was not, or might not be, a real Chinaman.

And yet there were other advantages in the play, oo.

Creighton would be apt to look with suspicion upon he appearance of a strange Chinaman among the memers of his society that night, and might guess, or surmise, that Nick Carter might be attempting one of his well-known tricks, unless he knew to a certainty that Nick Carter was still at the hotel, or was at that moment in some other part of the city.

That was the situation of affairs, when, half an hour efore midnight, that Sunday night, Nick Carter, in his isguise as Men Gee Chang, stole through a secret enrance into the little secret room in the cellar, behind and beneath Lee Dick's store, in Chinatown.

"You are a trifle late," was Lee Dick's greeting, as he received the detective. "There is not much time o post you thoroughly in what you will have to know o-night."

"I came as soon as it was possible," the detective relied.

"And are you quite ready to take all the chances, Mr. Carter?"

"Yes; all of them, Lee Dick," was the reply.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MEETING OF THE TONG.

We will pass over the process of Nick Carter's education into the secrets of the tong, as Lee Dick instructed him that night, using upward of an hour for it, and being still reluctant to permit the detective to undertake what he had to do without more coaching.

But there was no more time. The meeting began at midnight, and Lee Dick had already stated that the candidate should be there by one o'clock.

"It is unfortunate," he said, "that there was no time o take you there last night, as I proposed to do, to show you by the arrangements of mirrors what you will have to face to-night; but if we make haste, there may still be time to give you a hasty view of the place before you make your entrance."

"Who is to take me there? You?" asked the detective.

"Wait. You shall see," was the reply. "Now, you will leave here by the way you came. At the end of the alley, but just inside of it in the dark so that you will not be seen, you will draw back into the deeper shadow, and wait until some one touches you on the arm, so, and whispers in your ear the name of Hop Ling. Hop Ling will be your conductor."

And as the detective made his way cautiously to the place of meeting at the end of the alley, he murmured to himself:

"I'd be willing to make a fair-sized bet that Hop Ling and Lee Dick are more closely related than brothers."

That he was correct in that surmise was proved a few moments later when he felt the touch upon his arm and heard the whispered name of Hop Ling; for, even though the voice was disguised, Nick instantly recognized the fact that it was Lee Dick who had spoken.

But he made no comment.

They hurried through the narrow streets together a distance of a quarter of a mile, entered a narrow passageway between two houses, traversed it to the rear of the buildings, and from there mounted a rickety flight of stairs to an upper floor, thence traversed a long and narrow hall that was pitchy dark, mounted others stairs, passed through more halls and up more stairs, and all the time Lee Dick retained a firm hold upon one of the detective's arms, guiding him.

Nick realized then how futile it would have been for him, or any other person not accustomed to the route, to have found the way from the street to that meeting place.

There were many places where it would have been natural to have turned aside, rather than to have kept to the correct course.

At last they stopped, and Lee Dick whispered into the detective's ear:

"We are now beyond the entrance to the meeting room of the tong. We are close to a narrow door which will admit us to the loft that I have mentioned, from whence we can see into the meeting room. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Come, then; but as you value your life, do not make a sound of any kind, for, even though we may not hear them, down below us, they can hear any sound that we might make."

Nick squeezed his friend's arm by way of reply, and they passed through the narrow doorway.

As soon as they were inside the place Lee Dick pulled Nick to a halt, and removed his own shoes and Nick's also; then they tiptoed forward a short distance by the glow of an electric flash light which Lee Dick carried, and which he had not dared use till then.

By its gleam Nick saw that they were directly under the roof of the building, and that immediately in front of them was what appeared to be a closet, having a small opening in it that was a foot square. It had the appearance of being a ventilating shaft to the roof, from one of the rooms under it—as indeed it was.

Lee Dick reached inside and adjusted something that his fingers found there; and he turned to the detective, at the same time releasing the spring of his flash light.

"Now, look," he said.

The detective stooped and peered through the opening that has already been described; and he saw before him, reflected upon a mirror that was concealed inside the shaft, and which Lee Dick had adjusted for his accommodation, a scene which made him almost gasp with surprise.

Much has been said in various kinds of so-called literature about Chinese devils, Chinese dragons, and Chinese idols and gods, but in the scene that was reflected in that mirror into which Nick Carter gazed was the real thing.

Just how many mirrors there were arranged inside of that shaft, and just how they had been arranged to bring that scene so vividly from the room below them, before the eyes of Nick Carter, he could not tell. It was sufficient that the scene was there, reproduced in miniature, like manikins, until the moving figures that were depicted looked like marionettes on a stage. If you will look at your own reflection in the big end of a field glass you will understand precisely what is meant.

In the reflection before him Nick saw reproduced a large room with a raised dais at one end of it, upon which was seated the most hideous-looking object that the detective had ever seen.

It was, or appeared to be, a seven-headed monster, having a body of enormous size, and arms that reached out in either direction in the attitude of embracing something; and the seven heads were moving about as if they were actually animated with life—as, indeed, they were, for, as a matter of fact, the supposed idol contained at that moment seven Chinamen, each one with his head poked into one of the false masks of the idol, the body of each one incased inside the huge body of the idol—and these, acting as one, represented the great seven-headed god which this particular tong worshiped as its sovereign.

At the left of this monster a green dragon with two heads was crouched, and the reader will readily understand that it was worked in the same manner.

To the right was a red dragon, more hideous than the green one, and, crouching upon the main floor, in front of the platform, were seven reptilian figures, each with two or three or more heads, up to five, each one animate, hideous, repulsive to the last degree.

The body of the hall was literally packed, sardine-like, with humanity; with Chinamen on their knees, each with his head bowed low, and each with his head covered by a hood—and wherever a hood was not owned by the Chinaman, he had pulled his blouse over his head to take the place of one.

Nick Carter judged that this scene was the opening ceremony of the tong, and he was correct about that.

He looked on in silence, for he dared make no sound, according to the instructions he had received from Lee Dick; and, as he looked, the belly of the seven-headed monster in the middle of the dais opened like a door, and a tall Chinaman, arrayed in green silk, stepped out upon the platform in front of the god—or devil, as one is pleased to call it.

Lee Dick gripped Nick Carter's arm, and Nick knew, by intuition, that the man who had issued from the body of the monster was Long Low, otherwise Wun Lung—and he wondered if the man were also Roland W. Creighton.

He had no doubt that it was Creighton, as we have reason to know.

It was at that instant that Lee Dick reached forward, pulled the detective back from the opening in the shaft, closed the small door, and drew the detective away from the place—and after a moment they were again in the corridor, or hallway, outside the place, and Lee Dick was whispering into Nick's ear:

"Come now. There is no time to lose. In five minutes you will be expected."

"Expected? Am I expected?" the detective asked.

"Yes. Your name has gone in. It has been acted upon. You will be called up for the test now. Do you think you can pass through it?"

"I must. There is no thinking about it."

"Remember, it is I who take you inside. I will be close to you all the time, but there is absolutely nothing that I can do for you if you are suspected. I must stand idly by, if that should happen, and see you killed. To interfere would only be to have myself killed, also, without hope of aiding you."

"I understand."

"Come, then, into this room here; there is a private staircase that leads down from it to the anteroom of the lodge room below."

He pushed open a narrow door concealed in the wainscoting and led the detective through it—and then, just as Lee Dick struck a match and reached forward to light a candle, Nick Carter, who had not been able to see a thing, stumbled and pitched forward, unable to catch himself as he fell.

It was perhaps the most fortunate fall that Nick Carter had ever taken, notwithstanding the fact that he was pitched forward in such a manner that the top of his head came into violent contact with the wall before him.

The point was that the wall gave way when he struck it; that his head had hit against the one spot upon that partitioned wall which operated the spring of a secret door the existence of which even Lee Dick had not suspected.

The door flew open, and Nick Carter fell through it.

Lee Dick instantly dropped the match with which he had been about to light the candle; and, in doing that, both men discovered that a faint glow, as from another light farther back in that secret place, dispelled a part of the darkness.

The detective, who had parted his lips to make an appropriate remark about his fall, and the collision between his head and the wall, and Lee Dick, who had opened his mouth to exclaim about the secret door, thus discovered, closed them again without uttering a sound, for another sound came to their ears at the same instant.

It was the sound of a woman's voice, singing—and in English; and with the sound of it Nick Carter not only recognized the song as one he had often heard Emily Morton sing in her own music room during the lifetime of her father, but he recognized her voice as well.

He started to his knees and gripped Lee Dick's arm. Then he raised himself to his feet.

He had become the leader again.

Of far more importance was it to him that Emily should be rescued from her perils than that Roland Creighton should be arrested that night; the latter might be accomplished at any time.

"Come," he said, in a whisper. "We have other things to attend to now than that beastly tong. Did you know that that door was there, Dick?"

"I did not suspect it," was the reply, "and I have been inside that room and have searched it many times." He closed the door from the inside as he spoke.

Before them was another door, leading out from the same square room they were in, and it was partly ajar, which accounted for the fact that they had heard the singing, and Nick's thought was:

"Emily Morton knew that I and my assistants would be searching for her, and that if we came near enough to hear that song we would recognize it, and her voice, too."

He took the lead now, pushing past the partly opened door they had discovered.

It admitted them to a larger, square room, and from the center of it, through an opening like a trapdoor, a faint light shone; it was from there, too, that the sound of the voice came to them.

The detective stepped quickly forward and looked down, and he found that he was peering into a sumptuously furnished apartment directly below them, where Emily Morton was seated upon a chair, singing to the boy, Torchy, who sat upon a hassock at her feet, with his head upon her lap, while she gently stroked his curly red hair.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAYING THE PENALTY.

Nick leaned forward and thrust his head into the trapdoor opening; then he called to Emily, softly, yet loudly enough for her to hear him.

"Emily!" he called, using her given name. "It is I—Nick Carter."

She raised her face toward his. Torchy leaped to his feet, all animation on the instant, and it was the boy who replied.

"I knew that you'd come," he called back, but with caution, nevertheless; and then he beheld the face of a Chinaman looking down upon him, as Emily had already seen it.

"It is I—Nick Carter—disguised as a Chinaman," Nick called again.

In bending forward to call to them, and in supporting himself with his hands on either side of the trap, the detective's grasp had fallen upon a rope near the opening. A second glance at it now revealed the fact that it was in reality a rope ladder—probably the very one that Creighton had made use of in leaving that room to attend the meeting of the tong.

Nick Carter thought rapidly in the moment that followed. The next he dropped the ladder through the opening. Then he called to Emily again.

"Where is your maid, Celeste?" he inquired.

"I do not know," replied the girl. "She was taken from us when we came to this awful place."

"Can you climb that ladder?" he asked. "It is perhaps better for you to come out this way."

"Yes. It is the only way out, now. The door is barred on the outside;" and without awaiting further instructions she ordered Torchy to precede her, which he did at once.

Emily waited only long enough for the boy to reach the top of the ladder, when she followed him with all the agility of the athletic young woman that she was; and then Nick Carter drew up the rope ladder again, and, folding it, left it precisely as he had found it.

"Quick, now, Dick, lead us out of here," he said to his companion. "There isn't a moment to lose, is there? Won't they be looking for me down there at the tong?"

"Not yet. They do not come out to search for a candidate who is late. It will be half an hour before they will close the meeting with the usual ceremonies. Come."

"Straight to that secret room in your cellar, if we can get there," said the detective; and thither they went, fortunately without molestation, although twice they were obliged to halt and conceal themselves until some passing Chinamen had gone on their ways.

But the secret room in the cellar of Lee Dick's store was reached at last.

"Now, Dick," said the detective, speaking sternly, for he had orders to give, and he intended that they should be obeyed to the letter, "listen to what I shall tell you."

"Yes, Mr. Carter," was the reply.

"Supply Miss Morton with some sort of a disguise with which she can pass through the streets of Chinatown without attracting attention at this hour of the night. Torchy will need none."

"Betcherlife I won't," commented Torchy.

"Then as soon as I have gone away——"

"Are you going to leave us?" gasped Emily, frightened now that the danger was nearly passed.

"Yes," replied the detective. "But I will rejoin you after a time. Don't interrupt me, please. Now, Dick."

"Yes, sir."

"Take Miss Morton and Torchy from here directly to police headquarters. The chief will not be there, but the inspector on duty will telephone for him. Have him asked to go to his office at once. He should be there before I get there. And, Emily?"

"Yes," she replied, eager now to do as she was told.

"Tell the chief your story, as soon as he arrives. Tell him that I will be there presently with Creighton, even if I have to bring Creighton's dead body. He will understand that I mean it. Then, Lee Dick, you offer to lead the reserves back here to the meeting of that tong, and have it raided from roof to cellar. I want that building torn inside out, and every secret of it revealed, every idol in it destroyed, and every murderer that attends that tong placed under arrest. Will you do it?"

"Yes," was the calm reply.

"That is all, then. Carry out my orders exactly as I have given them. Now I am going."

"Can't I go with you?" asked Torchy.

"No," was the short answer he received; and the detective turned and disappeared beyond the door.

He found his way back again to that building in which the meeting of the tong was no doubt still in progress.

He passed through the narrow halls, mounted all the stairs, and admitted himself finally to that attic where the shaft with the mirrors had revealed so much to him.

The detective easily discovered for himself the method of adjusting the mirrors, and so he presently looked upon that scene in the room below once more, and just at the moment when the ceremonious part of the meeting was drawing to an end.

He saw the hideous objects on the dais dismantled, and stored under the platform; he saw the Chinamen, none of whom seemed desirous of leaving the place, group themselves into knots about the room and chatter and gesticulate—and he saw the man whom he now recognized as the supposed Wun Lung, or Long Low, appear from a doorway back of the dais and cross the room to another door, by which he left it.

Nick Carter left his post of observation.

He hurried from the attic to the hall and passed into the little room where he had so strangely discovered the secret door; he passed through that, too, and crouched beside it, inside the room where the trapdoor was located, and waited.

Nor had he long to wait.

Presently he heard the sound of a footfall outside the door, and then it opened. In the aperture thus created, stood the tall figure of the supposed Chinaman, in whom, Nick had not a doubt, was concealed the personality of former Inspector Creighton.

Creighton, suspecting nothing, stepped quickly forward toward the trapdoor; but, as he did so, Nick Carter appeared suddenly in front of him—and at the same instant Nick Carter's right fist shot out like a battering-ram, and, following it instantly, the left one.

The former one caught the man on the point of the jaw; the second one, almost at the same instant, struck him in the pit of the stomach.

No man, however big and strong, could have withstood two blows such as those were, and this one colıpsed like a wet rag, and without a sound other than ıat made by his heavy fall.

He stirred once or twice as Nick bent over him, adusting the irons; and then, as the man showed signs f returning activity—and we may as well admit at nce that he was no other than Creighton, as Nick ad suspected—the detective cut a short section from he end of the rope ladder, made two half hitches round Creighton's neck with it—for it was one thing o capture the man and quite another to get him safely way from that nest of seething humanity—and vaited, holding the two ends of the rope in his hands.

"What has happened?" Creighton demanded, after a noment, in Chinese.

"I have happened," Nick Carter replied, in English; nd at the sound of that voice the ex-policeman made a spasmodic effort to leap to his feet.

"None of that," said the detective sharply, jerking hard on each end of the rope he held, and effectually choking his captive. "I've got you where I want you now, Creighton, and you can't escape. Yours hands are shackled behind your back, but your feet are free, and you can walk. I can choke you into unconsciousness in a minute, and I'll do it, if you make a sound or an attempt to escape. You've got to go with me to headquarters, whether I take you alive or dead. Now, get upon your feet and lead the way through the halls, and down the stairs. You know the way; follow it. But, remember, if anything happens, you will be the first dead man. I am through compromising with you. You won't get away this time. You will be locked up where there are no hidden keys and daggers, and you will be guarded by more men than one, or two, or three—until you dangle at the end of a rope, as you will do, for that is still the punishment for murderers in this State. Remember, if we meet anybody, we are both Chinaman, and I will do the talking. If you attempt to speak, it will be the very last effort of the sort you will ever make."

Half an hour later Nick Carter, still driving his captive before him as two boys might have played horse, walked into police headquarters, and to the private office of the chief, where he delivered his prisoner.

He found that the chief was waiting for him with Emily Morton, Torchy, and Lee Dick, and that Chick had just arrived from the hotel, in reply to a summons from the chief.

"Chief," said the detective, "this man is Creighton, although he doesn't look the part. I suspect that he has murdered his former servant, whom he is now impersonating, and——"

"We know that already," the chief interrupted. "He confessed as much to Miss Morton, who has told me about it. The body of the Chinaman is concealed in the cistern of Creighton's former home, which he burned down. I have just sent——"

The telephone rang out sharply and interrupted him. The chief seized the receiver, and the others heard him say:

"Oh! It is you, is it, Patsy?" then there was a considerable wait while the chief listened at the receiver. Then he said: "Come right here to headquarters, Patsy. Mr. Carter is here. So is Miss Morton and Torchy, both safe and unharmed; and so is Creighton. Mr. Carter has just brought him in, a prisoner. He won't escape this time."

He returned the receiver to the hook, and, turning to the others, said:

"Patsy and Demetrius, working together, have found the body of the Chinaman in the cistern before my men could get there. Patsy says it was the idea of Demetrius to search in that place, because he happened to know that Creighton, once before, a long time ago, used such a place to conceal the body of one of his victims near Constantinople. I reckon the several cases against you are pretty clear, Creighton," he said.

There was no reply.

Creighton had resorted to his customary policy of utter silence.

The police raided the old Chinese rookery a few minutes after Nick Carter had left it, and the maid, Celeste, was found imprisoned in one of the secret rooms. She was terrified almost out of reason, but recovered rapidly upon being reassured of her safety and liberty.

And that is the end of the story save only to say that the trial of Roland W. Creighton, ex-inspector of police and former acting head of the detective bureau of that city, attracted almost world-wide attention, and that his ultimate conviction, without the menbers of the jury leaving their seats, was universally satisfactory.

Nor did his lawyers succeed in their efforts to obtain an appeal, so, forty-one days after his arrest, Nick Carter's prophecy concerning him came true, and Creighton, alias Mawker, alias The Mocker, was duly hanged by the neck until he was dead.

THE END.

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